Sanford

Essentials of Fire Department

Customer Service

Alan V. Brunacini

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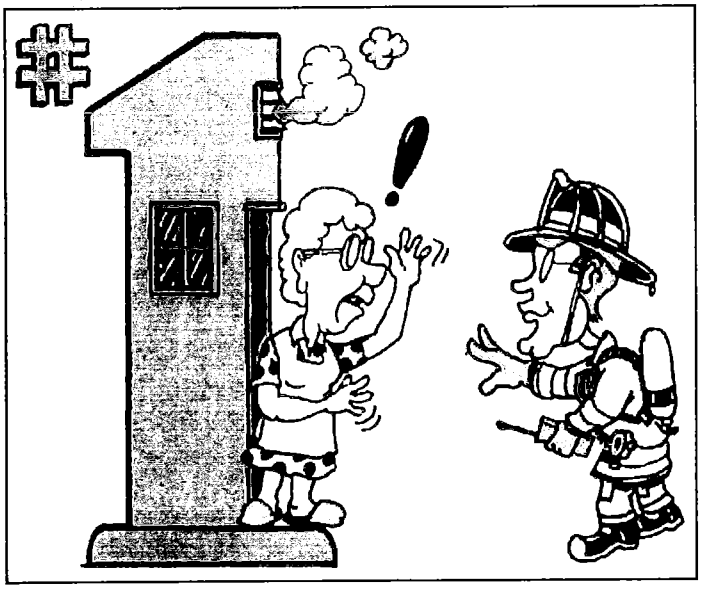

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Introduction

Essentials Of Fire Department Customer Service

This little manual is the result of a series of thoughts, ideas, hallucinations, and reflections relating to fire department customer service and is structured around the following opportunity categories:

1. Our essential mission and number one priority is to deliver the best possible service to our customers.

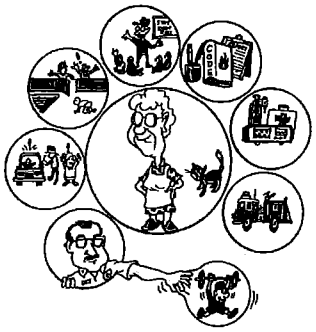
2. Always be nice — treat everyone with respect, kindness, patience, and consideration.

3. Always attempt to execute a standard problem-solving outcome: quick/effective/skillful/safe/caring/managed.

4. Regard everyone as a customer.

5. Consider how you and what you are doing looks to others.

6. Don't disqualify the customer with your qualifications.



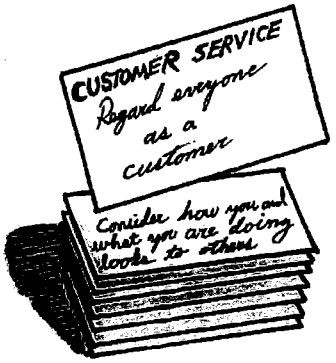
7. Basic organizational behavior must become customer-centered.

8. We must continually improve our customer service performance.

Preface

You pay a visit to your friendly local library. You find your way to the "tell me what's ever been written about a particular subject" section. You sit down in front of a blank screen and enter FIRE DEPARTMENT CUSTOMER SERVICE. You bravely hit the "search" button. The machine springs to life. You hear the clutch clutching, the whirley-gig whirling....the supercharger kicks in....the lights dim in the building, the machine sputters and shakes, the screen flickers, lights up, and shows: "No such subject." You become anxious and bewildered. You obviously require a clinical intervention. A sofa visit to your shrink clearly indicates you should develop a hobby and stop asking dumb machines dumb questions. You begin to macrame athletic supporters for "B" shifters. Your stress vanishes. Life is good.

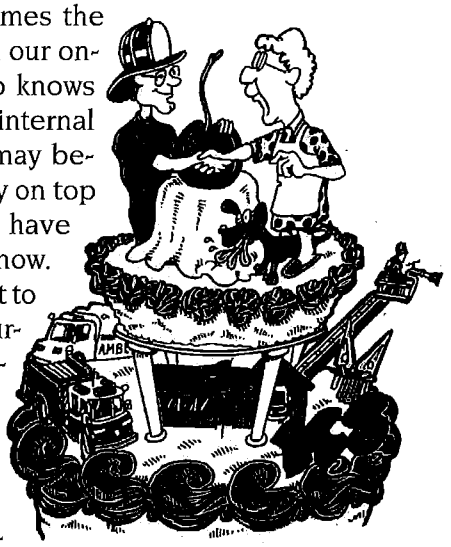
This lack of documentation about what seems should be a fairly major topic is a curious reality for an occupation that has been intensely and continuously serving customers for the past 200 years. Most firefighters come from the factory with a strong action orientation and a natural inclination to focus more on the "hard" technical-tactical part of the job, rather than on the "soft" human stuff. That may explain why, up until now, even though we basically have done a good job with our customers, we have pretty much skipped talking, teaching, and certainly writing about the human aspect of service delivery. Perhaps after doing it so much, for so long, the time has come to document some of the basic human relations details involved in fire department customer service.



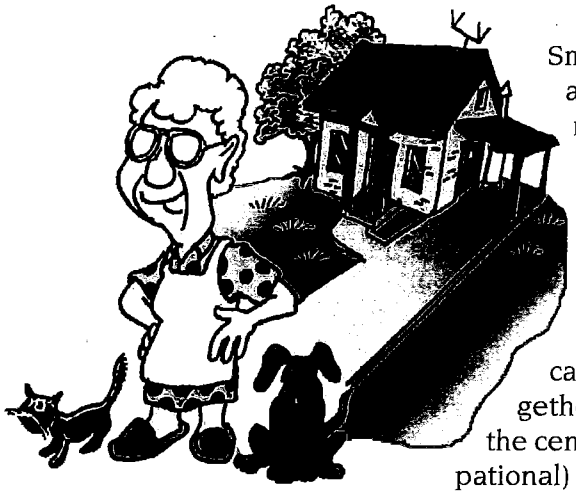
At any rate, one day a while back, while we were sitting around polishing the silver, I started jotting down (those damned 3x5 cards again) some real simple customer service ideas and observations. As I kept doodling, I ended up organizing my mental gymnastics around some major topics/areas of opportunity. I ended up with eight. These eight

(topics) seem to make sense and have held up pretty well as I have used them as the basic structure for writing the material in this little booklet. Like most of my projects, this one started out in my shirt pocket and ended up in the somewhat longer form you are now reading.

It seems that our service just naturally evolves through stages of development. Over the past two decades, we have discovered, implemented, and internalized significant improvements in the service we deliver. The equipment, software, and hardware we use to deliver those services is more advanced and most importantly of all, we have made major investments in increasing the skill level, understanding, and overall capability of our human resources — our firefighters. These efforts all add up to a package of improvements in our overall effectiveness that, taken together, produce a snapshot of our current stage of development.



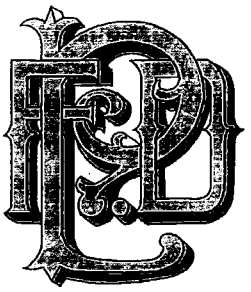
Perhaps customer service becomes the next logical area we must take on in our ongoing developmental process. Who knows — improving how we relate to the internal and external humans in our world may become the whipped cream and cherry on top of all the other developments we have worked so hard to achieve up until now. Using customer service development to add the finishing touches to the current stage of our basic operational approach may also provide access to the insight and intelligence from those who receive our service (our customers) that will identify what should be next on our continuous improvement menu. No developmental process will just naturally surrender information easily, so we must listen critically and pay attention as we proceed to the next stage of our development. Simply, if you don't learn to read the map and listen to the natives as you go along, it's pretty easy to get lost and stay lost, or to not know where you are when you arrive where you are.



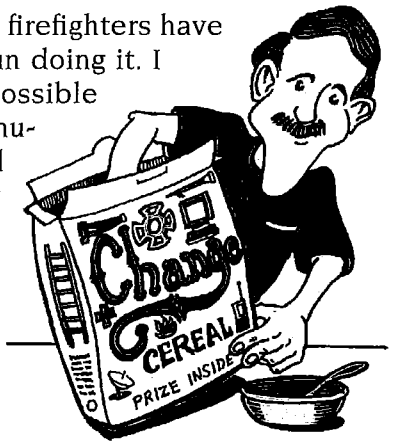
A new character shows up in this material — Mrs. Smith. She really is not new — actually she has been around as long as we have. It's just in the past we have never very effectively included her in our thoughts, planning, and operations in the special way that makes her our customer. She represents the regular, real live people who call us for help when something burns, or something hurts, or something breaks. A lot of both her immediate and her long-term future depends on how we respond to her call for help, and how we treat her during our time together. I believe she (the customer) should begin to play the central role in both our personal and professional (occupational) mentality and in our organizational service delivery game plan.

Necessarily, a lot of my own personal context and orientation shows up in how I have approached and developed this material. It is difficult (or impossible) to separate yourself from your own system. I have joyfully passed through all of the stages of a firefighter's career (and life) from birth to senility, all within the Phoenix Fire Department. We are a very active (125,000 alarms - 1995), metro, full-service, career fire department, in what has been and still is a rapidly growing, dynamic sunbelt city. Phoenix is now the seventh largest city (1,100,000 population/470 square miles) in the United States.

Phoenix has been, and still is, a very progressive, positive, and encouraging place to operate and deliver service. The customer service material that follows is the result of my direct involvement with the Phoenix Fire Department during my entire adult (?) life. The service delivery examples I use are all true stories that actually have occurred in Phoenix. My observations have emerged out of almost forty years of being actively involved with the smartest, most capable, open, nicest, nuttiest, best-natured workforce on the planet. Our department members have been enormously patient with a steady stream of ideas, projects, experiments, and efforts that have produced the change required to continually "fix" our system (and us), and to move forward.



For the past twenty years, Phoenix firefighters have eaten change for breakfast and had fun doing it. I personally have received the best possible care and feeding a Fire Chief could humanly receive. I pinch myself (and smirk) at least twenty-five times a day for somehow landing in such a positive place, inhabited by such nice people.



The purpose of my shameless bragging (other than just shameless bragging) is to make a deal with the readers to first understand where I come from, and then to plug where they come from into the "Phoenix" material as they read it. Fire Departments are alike in a lot of ways, but we are also different in many other ways. In places and ways where we are similar, it's possible to bring new outside stuff in, plop it down in our system, and make it work pretty easily. The fun begins when we stumble onto a positive new idea that would improve the performance of our system, but

conditions where it is working are different from us. This is where it's necessary to remodel, retool, re-engineer, or re-smush (sometimes completely disguise) the idea so that it effectively fits into your system. I guess customizing new stuff to somehow fit into our own system is a major part of the agony and ecstacy of the change and improvement process — and one of the big-time functions we pay leaders on every level to lead.

I have used this little booklet as a place to record (actually unload) a lot of stuff that I have been watching and thinking about for awhile. Some of it probably involves using our physical and human resources in some ways that may be a little outside the context (paradigm) of traditional fire service management and operations. Don't worry too much if reading it causes you to break out in big, itchy hives. It's only our typical reaction when someone or something smacks our comfort zone. The hives will go away in just a second and are probably reflective of the way most of us fire service managers have been raised. I can relate to this process because I (also) spend a lot of time recovering from "sticker shock" when one of my very secure (brilliant) 1972 perceptions/beliefs gets blasted with some lunatic 1996 reality.

The reader will probably deal with the material in a smorgasbord kind of way — take what tastes good and leave the rest. I hope that "tasting" the material breaks loose some new ideas on how we all can do an even better job for Mrs. Smith.

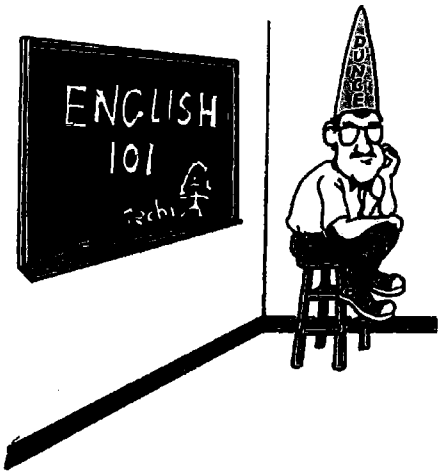
This material may find its way into the hands of nonfire service (that is, normal) people who have some interest in customer service. They must (simply) substitute their own job/business/occupation into any place they read firefighter, fire department, etc. I strongly suspect that basic, positive customer service is fairly universal and that while good fire department service is delivered in a bit more urgent way, it's not that different from driving a cab, flipping (and serving) pancakes, checking in sleepy hotel guests, or providing medical services to anxious hospital customers.

The reader will find this material to be simple, basic, and uncomplicated. It is not written in a very fancy or formal way. This approach is in no way meant to trivialize how much skill, effort, practice, and determination is required to deliver effective fire department customer service. What our troops face in the street can be enormously complex. A ton of books have been written (thankfully) about the detailed techniques we use to get the technical-tactical part of the job done. What might be different about this simple little essay is that it is meant only to describe the service delivery process from the position and feeling of the person who is receiving the service — our customer.

I have tried to write this like we were sitting around the fire station telling war stories and talking to each other. (I can't write well enough to disguise how I talk....you won't need a dictionary to understand the material.) The style and language is directed to those who work in the street to deliver service to real live customers so that they stay real and live.

My principal focus, orientation, and interest continues to be in the business end of our business where fire companies and customers come together. I have noticed that over the long haul in that exciting setting (the street), we are the most effective when we stick with the simple, basic stuff. I don't hang out with many academic or theoretical people (nice folks, but they talk funny), so it would be pretty tough for me to write any other way.

A lot of really smart people have reviewed this material. Most have observed that I must have received a somewhat better grade in Fire Fighting 101 than I did in English 101. I appreciate very much their patience in reading my ravings and improving the quality of the content without removing the street context. I also thank "Pooney" Pickering for dressing up my routine blab with his excellent illustrations. Pooney is both an experienced Phoenix Firefighter Paramedic and an excellent artist. Kathi Hilmes and Kevin Roche have both cheerfully packaged and repackaged the words as I have continued to reflect and scribble. They work hard every day trying to get me through the day and simply make life a joy for an old guy who gets lost a lot.



I also thank my old pal Doug Forsman and his Oklahoma State gang for their usual kindness and support. It's always nice to hang out with the very special people and place where you got started (OSU Class of '60).

As always, the author is ultimately responsible for any errors, omissions, goofs, or stuff that makes no sense.

I hope you have as much fun reading it as I had writing it.

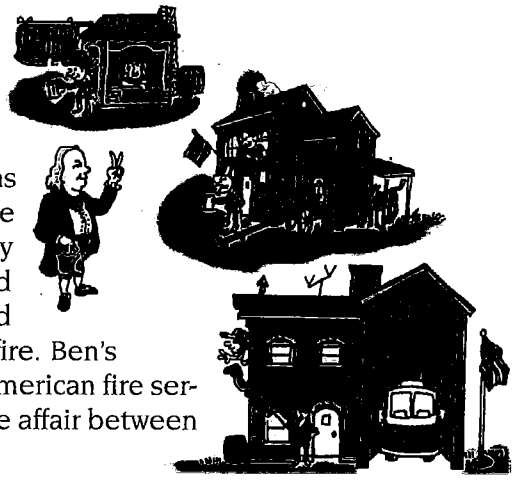
Alan V. Brunacini, 1996

1

Our essential mission and number one priority is to deliver the best possible service to our customers.

Today in the fire service, it's pretty easy to get distracted and lose track of why we are in business. Based on the possibility of us losing our way, it can be useful for us to look back at the very beginning of our service to see why we are what we are. It all started with a smart alec named Ben Franklin, who thought up a lot of answers to problems of his day. As ol' Ben hung out and watched the local color, he quickly identified that in those days there wasn't any organized community response when an unfriendly fire would visit a citizen. The typical outcome was that the fire would wreck everything and everybody that could not get out of its way. Ben basically invented the American Fire Service, as we know it today, to respond to the urgent needs of our ancestors who were threatened by fire.

What he started then is pretty much still in place now. Based on the urgency of a fire event, he recognized that short response time capability is always a big deal, so he designed a highly decentralized system with fire stations located throughout the community. He recruited highly action-oriented, intrepid firefighters, who were (and still are) attracted to the excitement of responding to emergency episodes. He formed fire companies who instantly developed pride in their unit, responsibility for their first-due area, and became highly competitive (sometimes nuts) with each other. He connected the companies with a semi-military organization and command structure. He developed an alarm and dispatch system with quick and easy access.



The beauty of his fire fighting system was that it was very simple — when citizens (customers) had fires where they didn't want them, they contacted Ben and his merry band of fire extinguishers, who responded quickly and operated to evict the fire. They solved the problem and were nice to the citizens before, during, and after the fire. Ben's basic design set the stage for virtually all subsequent American fire service development and has produced a 200-year-old love affair between the fire service and our customers.

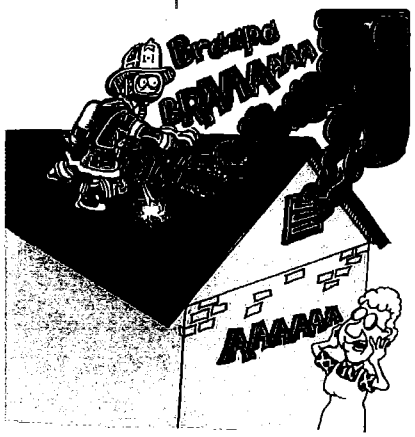
Our essential mission and number one priority is to deliver the best possible service to our customers.

Predictably, since Ben's initial brainstorm, a lot of fire service change has occurred. Technology has shifted and we now use computers instead of bells, 8V92 diesel engines instead of human and horse-powered pullers and pumpers, SCBA instead of wet beards (!), and 8-watt portable radios instead of speaking trumpets. Current codes, standards, regulations, financial management (and mismanagement), labor and community relations, politics, instant electronic communications, liability, lots of lawyers, and every conceivable special interest group have also created a lot more complex operational and management setting (progress?).

Ben's original system design (decentralized/quick/action oriented) has also placed us in an ideal position to expand our service delivery menu to deliver other essential urgent services — emergency medical service, haz-mat, special operations, technical rescue, and an entire array of other community, social, and customer service responses. This service delivery expansion has now pretty much filled up our activity dance card.

It currently takes a big inventory of stuff and a bunch of various characters to provide the support required to effectively deliver service to our customers. It's pretty easy for that support to become separated and detached from the actual service delivery (to the customer) simply because the energy and effort of that support (inputs) typically occurs a long way from where and when the service (outputs) actually gets delivered. It becomes a heroic, ongoing organizational challenge to somehow keep the inputs and outputs connected. It takes an array of people, places, and things to package up Engine One to get out the door and show up at Mrs. Smith's kitchen fire. While the support workers are the ground crew that is required to get Engine One to effectively fly, they pretty much never get to take the trip themselves and deal directly with the ultimate part of the whole system — the customer on the street.

Throughout the organization there are behind-the-scene workers, like the admin guy who captures the bucks to buy a chain saw (a truck company favorite used for vertical ventilation and heavy-duty access operations), the clerk who types and processes the purchase order to buy the saw, the delivery kid who picks up broken saws and brings back fixed ones, and the guy who works all day in the back of the shop providing counseling and orthopedic services to wayward saws who have been ridden hard and put away wet.



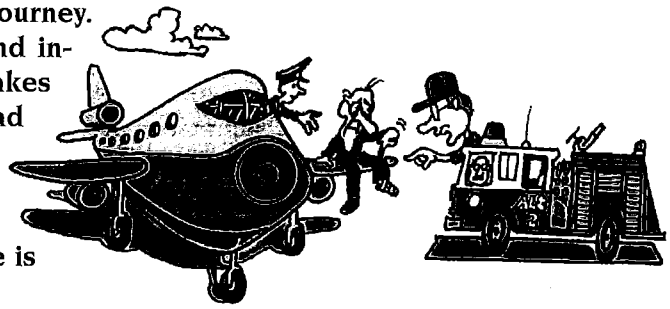
For these chain saw support people who never get to go up on the roof with Ladder One and pop the top, the outcome and objective of their job can (predictably) become the beginning, middle, and end of their focus. It will always be critical for these folks to do their part because their efforts are absolutely essential for us to deliver effective service. It is also critical that bosses somehow keep them connected to the overall customer service mission so that they know not only where they fit in but how important what they do (every day) is to Mrs. Smith (on her special kitchen fire day) when she needs us badly.

Our essential mission and number one priority is to deliver the best possible service to our customers.

Note:

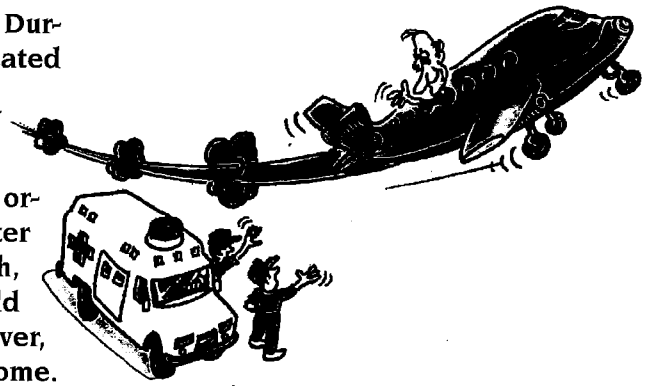
On the flip side of this process, the crew on Engine One had (also) better understand where they fit into the service delivery puzzle. They must approach their hero status with an appropriate amount of humility. It's pretty tough to act like Batman in a yellow helmet when the delivery guy and mechanic didn't show up, you have run out of Batbullets, and the Batmobile is so pooped from fighting evil that it won't fire up.

Mr. Smith is flying home from a business trip. He will change planes at the next stop to complete the journey. During the flight, he accidentally slips, falls, and injures his ankle. The flight crew stabilizes him, makes him as comfortable as they can, and radios ahead for a medical response team to be waiting at the gate. A paramedic engine company and an ambulance are dispatched to meet the plane. Upon landing, the medics quickly check Mr. Smith. He is stable with a painful ankle sprain.



They package him for a trip to the hospital for medical evaluation/treatment. The company officer makes arrangements with the gate agent to get Mr. Smith's luggage off the plane. This is done quickly and his bags are loaded with him in the ambulance. The officer also obtains the schedule for later departing flights to Mr. Smith's home destination and gets the agent's direct (double secret) phone number. The officer also gets Mr. Smith's home number and calls Mrs. Smith (at home) and explains what has happened. He describes what action is being taken and that Mr. Smith is essentially okay, but won't be chasing her (on foot at least) for a few days. The officer indicates (to Mrs. Smith) that Mr. Smith will be delayed, and he will call her later with details. Mr. Smith is transported to the closest hospital (3 miles). An emergency room doc shoots a couple of X-rays, stabilizes the ankle with a wrap, fixes him up with a crutch, and gives him two pain pills for the trip home. The hospital doc tells Mr. Smith to see his own doc when he gets home. The emergency room clerk gets the necessary insurance details and discharges him.

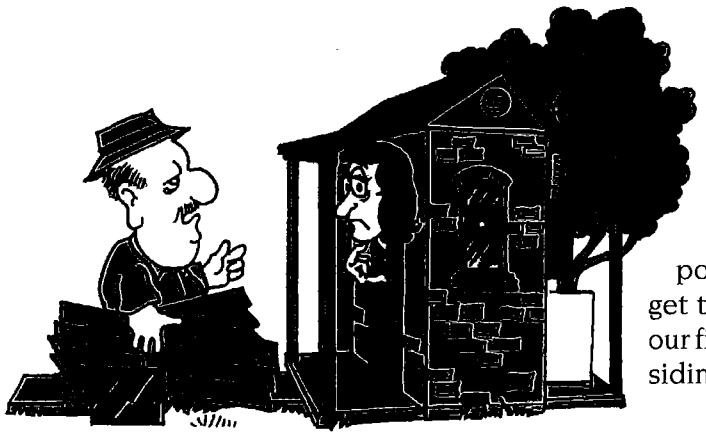
The ambulance crew has waited (in service and available) for Mr. Smith to get finished (hospital provides sandwiches/donuts in the lounge for the medics). During the treatment process, the crew has communicated with doc/nurses to estimate release time and has called the airline gate agent, who books Mr. Smith on the next flight home. Our ambulance delivers Mr. Smith back to the airport, checks his luggage, orders a wheelchair, and wheels him up to the counter to change his ticket. They say goodbye to Mr. Smith, wish him well, and tell him to lay off kicking field goals for several weeks. Airline personnel take over, get Mr. Smith to the gate, and the plane gets him home. The ambulance crew calls Mrs. Smith to give her arrival



flight details. In one week, Mr. Smith writes a letter to the Fire Chief (who didn't do anything), describes the service he received, and asks the Fire Chief to thank/commend the troops. The Fire Chief follows Mr. Smith's instructions.

What was the cost of the value the crew added to the service delivery event? First of all, they did a regular EMS sprained ankle intervention. This is the basic service that was delivered. Then, the company officer got Mr. Smith's bags (in case he had to spend the night), thought about getting him home after the hospital, and set it up with the gate agent. The ambo guys waited at the hospital (ate hospital chow and schmoozed with hospital types), and then drove Mr. Smith the three miles back to the airport. Nobody had to suffer a major (or minor) personality change. The crew independently solved the problem within their empowered organizational capability and resources, and added a big dose of nice. They treated Mr. (and Mrs.) Smith the way they would like to be treated if they landed in a strange place with a smushed ankle, and Bamo — WOW! service. This basic value-added approach uses our spirit and design as the basis for taking care of Mr. Smith.

While changes in technology, the current environment, our service delivery menu, and organizational complexity have created huge differences in our business, the most important element has not changed — the relationship and feeling between the customer who has a problem and the firefighter who responds to solve that problem. The two become intensely involved in a very special experience that defines essentially why we exist as a service. If we screw up that intense relationship (for any reason), both the firefighter and the customer can be in big trouble. Ben set us up originally for the very simple, singular reason to deliver service to the person needing help; we basically and simply exist as an organization to respond to these urgent customer needs. Ben's original system design continues to send that timeless message in a very practical way. The most profound evidence of our existence to the customer is that we show up when they are having a bad day and call us for help. Based on that reality, being a firefighter involves making a promise to the customer that we will respond to their call and do our very best. If we become so modern, so distracted, or so overcome with our own qualifications and importance that we lose sight of that promise and can't get that vision back, we should make an adjustment in our fire service vocation/avocation and go sell aluminum siding to people who live in brick houses.



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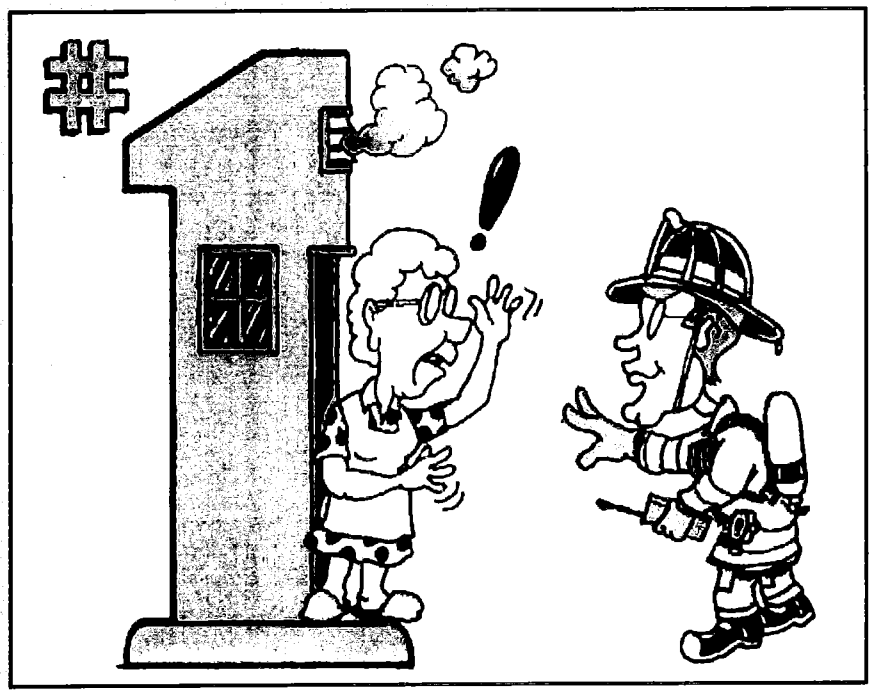


2.

Always be nice — treat everyone with respect, kindness, patience, and consideration.

To be effective, we must continually connect a lot of different organizational pieces into the operation of an integrated system. They include our physical assets (stuff) like facilities, equipment, tools, apparatus, electronics, SOPs, and software. Very little in our business is automated, so virtually all of these pieces require a real live human to make them operate. While these system components are absolutely essential to our operational effectiveness, they are in a special way "dumb" because they don't move very much or really do very much until a real live person comes along and hits the start button. Many times we become preoccupied with the mechanical, manipulative, technical, procedural, and tactical parts of our operation. While they are critical to our effective operation, they also require human activation. The point of this brilliant analysis is that while this part of our inventory is essential to deliver service to Mrs. Smith, it cannot by itself connect to her and with her as a customer. While she may admire the red and chrome and gold leaf, and may be impressed by the blinking/flashing light emitting diodes, when the chips are down and she is in a bind, the hardware and software become transparent to the person in trouble who needs help. The only part of the system the customer will focus on, really care about, or remember very long is the human part of the system who directly delivers service and who touches them as a human in a human and caring way. Simply, it's difficult to really believe a digitized prerecorded electronic voice when it says it cares about you.

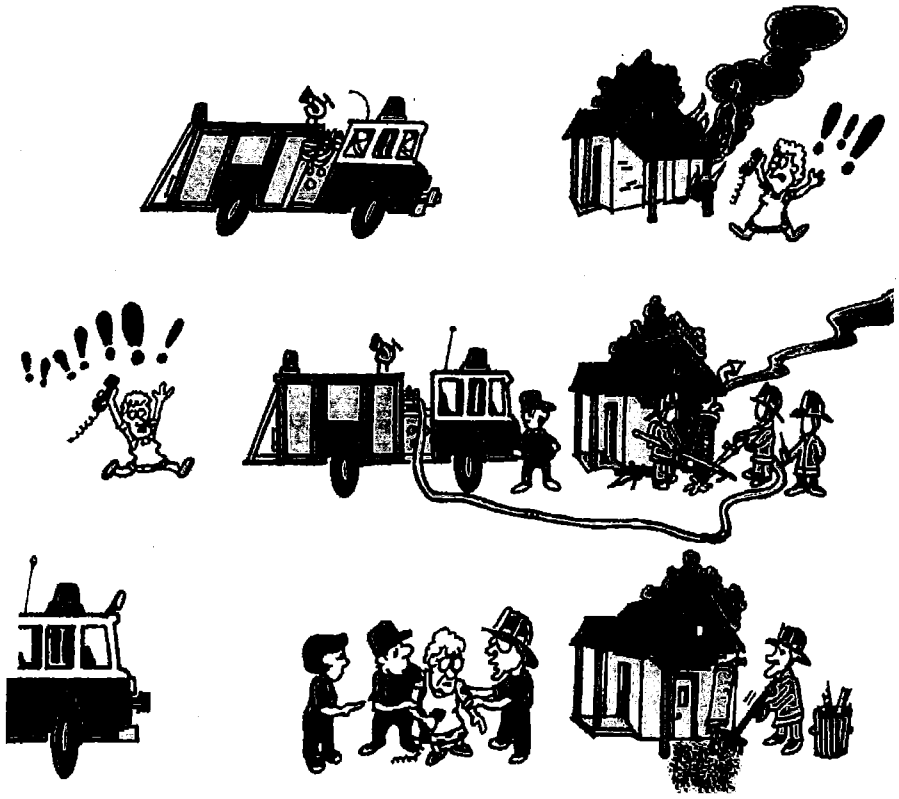
This human-to-human process begins with the initial call to request assistance. Mrs. Smith could care less that we have a space-age 911 electronic, nano-second, pass through computer driven call receipt and dispatch system with automatic address/phone verification capability and an instantaneous satellite-driven vehicle locator and an on-line computer terminal in the front seat of every vehicle that is painted red. Rather, she instantly connected with the voice and helpful feeling she received from a heads-up, calm, professional communications center

human. When Mrs. Smith sent the personal message that she was in trouble, the dispatcher sent a personal message back to her that the system cared about her and help was on the way — at that critical initial stage, the human (dispatcher) became the entire fire department to Mrs. Smith. As the event continues to evolve, Mrs. Smith somehow forgot to ask about the results of the last pump test on the rig that pulled up on Side A at her home. She will typically remember and relate (two page letter to the Fire Chief a week later) three basic observations about our service — none of it mentions pump test results (or anything else very technical):

#1 *Quick response time* — "It seemed you arrived as I was hanging up the phone."

#2 *Skillful performance that solved the problem* — "Your firefighters were so calm and took charge. Everything got better after they arrived."

#3 *Positive personal treatment* — "Everyone who responded was so kind, and I will never forget how nice they were to my family and to me."



Numbers 1 and 2 (QUICK/SKILLFUL) each get a nice three-sentence paragraph. Number 3 (NICE) gets a full page and a half from Mrs. Smith.

As Fire Department operational participants concerned with the long-term impact and effect of service to the customers within our community, we are absolutely compelled to examine the most consistently

important and memorable part of the service delivery experience to the customer — being NICE. When we receive feedback, observe, review, critique, listen, and examine being nice within a fire department service delivery context, it involves the basic behaviors of respect, kindness, patience, and consideration. The service delivery expectation of these behaviors involves the following:

Respect:

- Introduce yourself to the customer. **
- Determine and use the customer's name that respectfully and effectively fits their profile.
- Listen carefully to understand the customer's position, perspective, and needs.
- Give the customer your exclusive attention.
- Develop solutions in terms of the customer's context and orientation — don't impose your values on the customer — ask them what is important.

- Operate within the customer's rights and privileges — become the customer's advocate.
- Be careful of what you say and how you say it — practice verbal etiquette.
- Deliver service, not bureaucratic regulations, to the customers — be honest.
- Quickly return control to the customers and move to "reconnect" their lives.
- Say thank-you.

Key Respect Words:
esteem, deference, friendship, affection, trust, honesty

Kindness:

- Use a positive, friendly tone of voice and body language.
- Use supportive and encouraging language that the customer understands.
- Indicate you understand and care about the customer's position and problem (empathy).
- Reflect professional concern and guide the customer through the problem-solving process.

** Time and the nature of the emergency are factors in the establishment of a relationship with your customer — introductions and resumé exchanges in the front yard of a burning house are not expected, taking the time to introduce yourself after the immediate emergency has passed is effective, expected, and nice.

Always be nice — treat everyone with respect, kindness, patience, and consideration.

- Be courteous and polite — be a sweetheart.
- Be gentle with the customer.
- Ask the customer about their needs.
- Try to keep the customer connected to their security symbols (items); a blankey and a bear is always good therapy.
- Try to make the customer as comfortable as possible.

Key Kindness Words:
benevolence, humanity, generosity, charity, sympathy, compassion, tenderness

Patience:

- Take whatever time is required to establish positive interpersonal contact/communications with the customer.
- Explain what has happened, what you are doing, and what you think the outcome will be in clear, plain language.
- Work efficiently and explain the process and progress as you go.
- Spend extra time with the customer/family.
- Patiently attempt to "slow down," control, and stabilize the concern, fear, uneasiness of the customer — your calmness becomes contagious.
- Don't use excessively technical language — take the time to communicate in customer terms.

Key Patience Words:
quiet perseverance, even-tempered care, composure, stability, calm fortitude, resilient courage in trying circumstances (that's a beautiful phrase)

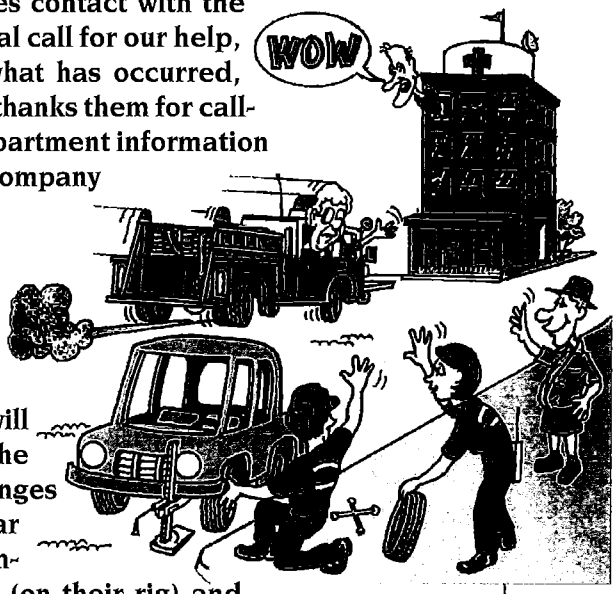
Consideration:

- Quickly connect with the customer's profile.
- Whenever possible, ask the customer how you can construct a response to fit their needs — ask them where it hurts; ask them what is important to them; ask them what will make them feel better.
- As quickly as possible, return control to the customer and "unvictimize" them.
- Consider and respond to the needs of everyone involved in the incident (including Good Samaritans).
- Avoid value judgments that reflect your personal perspective/opinion.
- Design and extend the service in your professional terms — deliver the service in customer's terms and context.
- Be careful of the customer's property and possessions.

Key Considerate Words:
showing kind awareness, regard for another's feelings and circumstances, thoughtful/sympathetic regard

Always be nice — treat everyone with respect, kindness, patience, and consideration.

Mr. Smith is driving home in his car. He is a diabetic and his chemical-physiological balance goes haywire. He becomes disoriented and hits a curb, which stops his car and flattens one front tire. A neighbor (to his accident) sees his curb-crashing stop, recognizes he is having some physical difficulty, and calls us for check welfare-medical assistance. Our communications center dispatches a paramedic engine company (closest unit) and an ambulance. Our engine responds and arrives in three and a half minutes. Our members quickly establish contact with Mr. Smith, introduce themselves, and listen carefully to his situation status report. The team does a standard Advanced Life Support (ALS) assessment. They treat, stabilize, and package Mr. Smith for transportation. They explain their actions throughout the treatment process. The ambulance then transports Mr. Smith to the closest appropriate hospital.



A crew member establishes contact with the neighbor who made the original call for our help, describes in general terms what has occurred, the action we have taken, and thanks them for calling. We leave our standard department information packet with the caller. The company officer contacts Mrs. Smith on the Engine's cellular phone, indicates that her husband has had a minor mishap and is basically stable/okay. He tells her that the car is driveable and if she will get ready, the crew will pick her up and drive her to the hospital. Part of the crew changes the tire and then drives the car to the hospital. Other crew members drive to the Smith home (on their rig) and brief Mrs. Smith, secure the home (lights, stove, pets, locks) and then drive Mrs. Smith to the hospital where they accompany Mrs. Smith to the emergency room. At that point, we collect our EMS tools and our medics and our units go back into service and return to quarters.

The response to this event describes a practical, doable (in this case, actual) set of activities that are added to a regular service delivery event that creates a WOW! level of NICE. In this case, the basis of solving the customer's problem is the fast, effective delivery of ALS service — after that, we can begin to add value with NICE humane treatment that goes beyond standard emergency medical treatment.

Nice isn't some blue sky, smiley-face program — it is a combination of both a definitive set of high level technical service delivery activities combined with another definitive set of ways we humanely deliver that service. While it may be just another day at the office for us, it's a pretty special day for the Smiths. It's hard to imagine any way that we could have handled the Smith's special day any better — just ask the Smiths.

Note:

This particular event occurred in a way that allowed the crew to add some important extra service and support beyond the effective delivery of a basic service: they were able to quickly reach Mrs. Smith on the phone; it was easy and fast to change the tire; and was manageable to drive by and pick up Mrs. Smith. Obviously, if the car was seriously crunched, it would have been towed off to the fix-up place. If Mrs. Smith was exploring the North Pole, the hospital or Mr. Smith would have contacted her and so on.

In any case, we have the chance to add value by first providing quick/effective customer-centered service and then going beyond that level to meet our definition of nice (WOW! level). This creates in and of itself an exceptional customer experience. Sometimes the situation (like this one) offers the opportunity to do some extra nice stuff that is outside our traditional approach (and mentality). These are the activities and experiences that over the long haul create an exceptional feeling, trust level, and loyalty among the customers, and a very special fire department reputation within the community.

This added value is the result of smart/capable fire crews that are empowered on their level to identify and respond to service delivery opportunities right on the spot and then being positively reinforced by bosses (also smart capable and empowered) who create an organizational experience and trust-based feeling that makes those crews want to do it again. Simply, we repeat behavior that is rewarded....pretty basic, huh?

Emotional Labor

The application of nice as a standard customer service characteristic adds an interesting new performance requirement to our business. We must deliver service (out in the real world) to a wide variety of customers and situations. Sometimes it's easy and natural to be nice. The customer is sane, lucid, oriented, and has a problem that is solvable within our regular system with our regular resources. In these positive situations, we like the customer, and we approve of their problem. On the other end of the scale, we find customers and problems that produce the opposite reaction (in us). These customers appear to be (and many times really are) nuts, disoriented, chemically scrambled, and generally unbalanced. Many times they have self-induced problems that

Always be nice — treat everyone with respect, kindness, patience, and consideration.

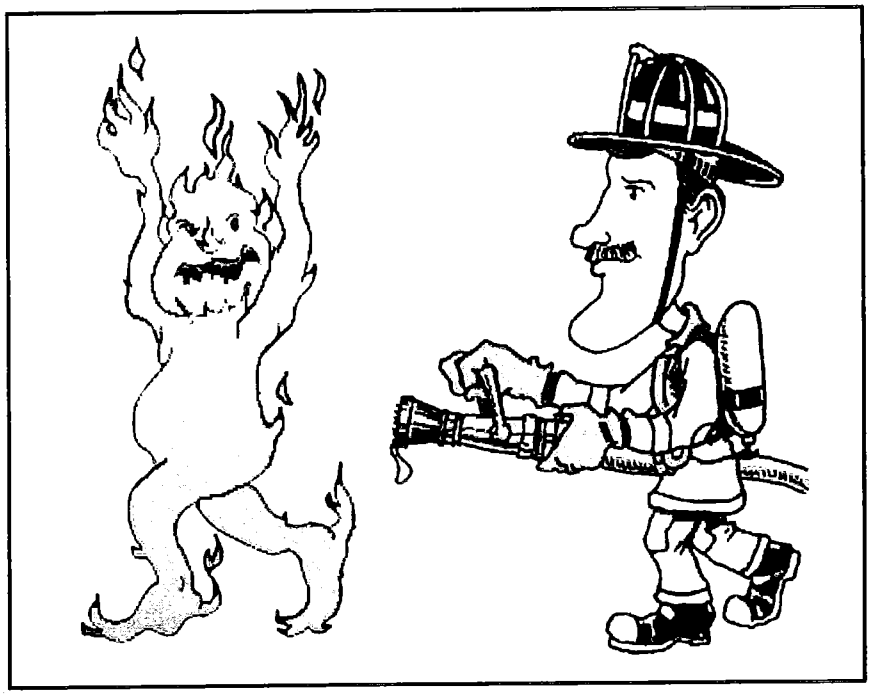
are the result of being dumb, irresponsible, mean, violent, and generally awful. Lots of these situations involve people who do not look, act, think, smell(!), talk, or behave like us. Delivering service in these difficult situations to such hapless souls (very unlike us) requires both physical effort and emotional labor.

This is where our "nice quotient" abruptly collides with reality — talking nice is easy, doing nice is tough. It's a piece of cake to rent a hall and have an "excellence" retreat (pep rally) that produces happy face slogans, buttons, and bumper stickers. The rubber abruptly meets the road when E1 gets a call at 2:30 a.m. (simply because there isn't anyone else to call), and they are nice to a deranged customer with a 65-year-old body and a 7-year-old mind, who is soaking wet, nude, locked inside a bathroom, hiding from aliens, that the crew is trying to coax out so they can check his or her physical welfare and then coordinate a ride to a rubber room at the funny farm.

When we encounter these tough events (and people), we must put on our nice game face and then orchestrate a standard service delivery performance. In the real world, this very simply involves acting — we don't feel nice, we may not really want to be nice, we may really want to choke the customer, but we simply act nice. This is where our job involves emotional labor. The application of this discipline and approach over time develops a natural and habitual capability and reaction to be nice in such tough situations — constantly nice behaviors produce consistently nice attitudes. This emotional labor must be supported by a strong service delivery game plan, a coordinated fire company team with a designated adult, and disciplined, patient players with the aptitude to do such difficult work.

In addition, we realize that our contact with the customer is typically episodic, short term, and we don't have to adopt them or take them home with us. The typical fast service delivery turnaround time creates a survivable customer service exposure when firefighters encounter tough people/situations. Our closed cab rigs also give us the capability for private stress relief after a particularly difficult encounter. We can engage in such sophisticated techniques as nerf batting each other, B-shift yoga, scream therapy, colorful oaths, or vulgar tantrums (below the audio level of the rig stereo). These highly "mature" techniques generally restore normal biorhythms and prepare us for the next high-quality service delivery opportunity. Team members who always play nice in not nice situations become the customer service role models and the authentic, quiet,

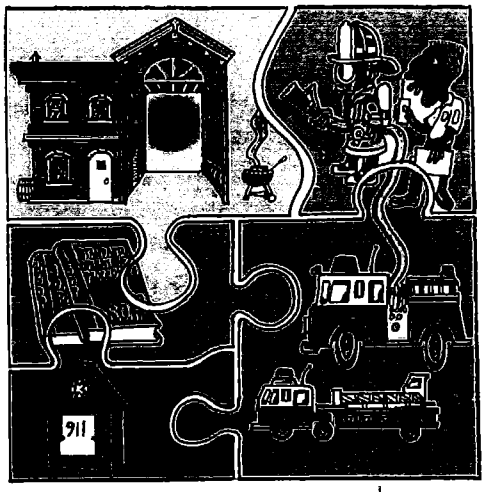
day-to-day heroes of our system — there should be a statue in every park in America (a great country) that recognizes the importance of their little (and big) acts of everyday humanity and kindness in difficult situations.



3.

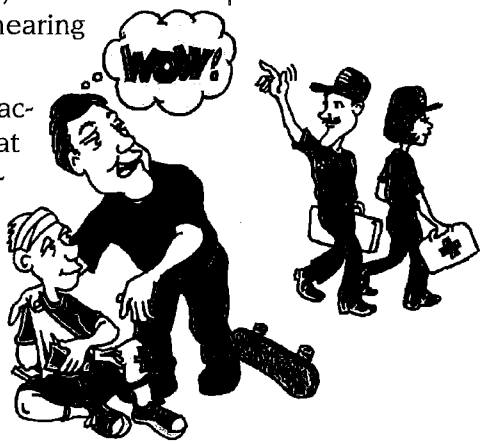
Always attempt to execute a standard problem-solving outcome: quick/effective/skillful/safe/caring/managed.

Our service is typically deployed using a combination of human, hardware, and software components that provide the capability to respond and intervene while the customer's problem is actually occurring. Intervention is the very simple and primitive reason we are in business. The separate deployment parts of our system are packaged in an integrated response and operational system that is designed to meet the regular and special needs of our customers. While the parts are fairly standard and nonmysterious (firefighters, stations, rolling stock, SOPs), each local area has its own special conditions that will require a somewhat different combination of components that make up the profile of that response system.



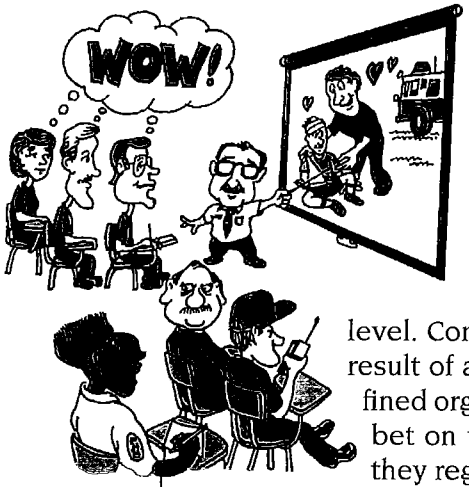
Customers trust us as pros to manage the system and expect that we will provide the correct combination of system pieces required for effective operation. They also expect that we have the capability (and inclination) to put all the pieces together in a way that solves their problem when they call us for help. Our current vision for effective service delivery involves coordinated teams of well-trained, managed, and motivated firefighters. These teams utilize the resources of the response system to deliver service in a way that delights(!) the customer.

The goal is to create a WOW! reaction in the person(s) receiving the service, watching the service being delivered, or hearing about the service after the event has concluded.



WOW! is the natural, involuntary, intense human reaction when receiving a service that is delivered in a way that is significantly, surprisingly, and positively beyond normal expectations.

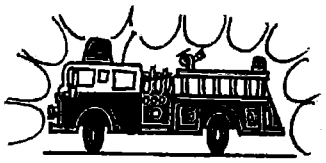
Taking on a WOW! service delivery objective sends the strong message to everyone in the organization that the team is going to go way beyond "okay" and "all right" outcomes to consistently create a service delivery experience that exceeds what the customer expected or even imagined.



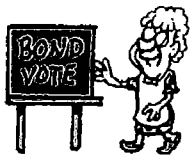
Service organizations perform at every level from lousy to WOW! In most cases, lousy performance is not the result of actually planning to deliver el sucko service. More often, it is the result of not planning to deliver any particular level of service at all. Based on that reality, every organization is going to perform at some level for some set of reasons — either consciously or unconsciously/either on purpose or accidently/either winning by plan or losing by default. It makes a lot of sense for every outfit to consciously decide on the appropriate service level for them and then to take control and manage that performance level. Consistently excellent fire department service is the result of an explicit, long-term, planned, acted out, and refined organizational approach. The smart money will always bet on the future of any organization after watching how they regularly and consistently connect with their internal and external customers — this even applies to a group of fire service monopolists like us (big surprise).

It seems fairly clear that WOW! service produces nice outcomes like:

- Secures and maintains adequate resources and benefits.



- Happy customers, bosses, voters, and workers.



- Brings out the best in us — provides positive job satisfaction.

- Places us in the best position to compete (current challenge).

- Completes our basic customer promise.

- It's fun to be good and to do good.

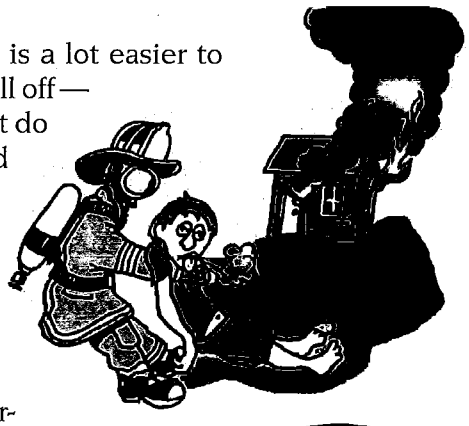
Always attempt to execute a standard problem-solving outcome: quick\effective\skillful\safe\caring\managed.

- Doing it right the first time eliminates bad press, liability, lawyers, lots of meetings, and extra paperwork.

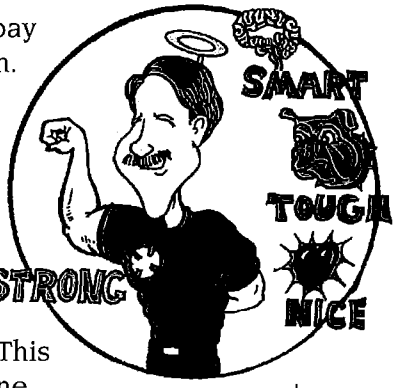
- It saves lives and lots of stuff that is really important to our customers.

- It's the right thing to do.

Delivering a WOW! level of service is a lot easier to say (and write about) than to actually pull off — particularly for an organization that must do what a fire department does, where and when we have to do it. We deliver service in the toughest situations to customers that are having days worse than bad.



Simply jumping on Big Red and going out to Mrs. Smith's kitchen fire ain't tiddlywinks. We pull off WOW! service with smart, tough, nice firefighters who think, pay attention, and play according to the WOW! game plan. Some of the plan is fairly detailed, some is pretty general and requires that we invent/improvise/adapt as we go.



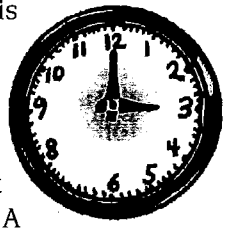
Customers and their problems don't come with an instruction manual, so long-term, excellent service performance is the result of a refined system where empowered firefighters operate as much between the lines as they do on the line. This WOW! outcome requires that we describe and define how the service delivery execution process will occur. The parts that make up the operational plan become the very practical game plan of how we will deliver service to the customer at show time. Making such a service delivery plan consistently work is a big deal. It requires strong planning, continual practice, smart application, and refinement forever — this approach is the only way we can really get good and stay good. Delivering service in the street is always teaching us lessons (if we pay attention), so this

Always attempt to execute a standard problem-solving outcome: quick\effective\skillful\safe\caring\managed.

approach is always under construction and is never complete. The service delivery plan gives us the capability to understand and then focus on what excellent service will look like before the event (the plan); what it will look like while it's going on (the process); and what it will look like after it's over (the outcome). The following are some of the major behaviors of an effective service delivery game plan:

- Quick
- Effective
- Skillful
- Safe
- Caring
- Managed

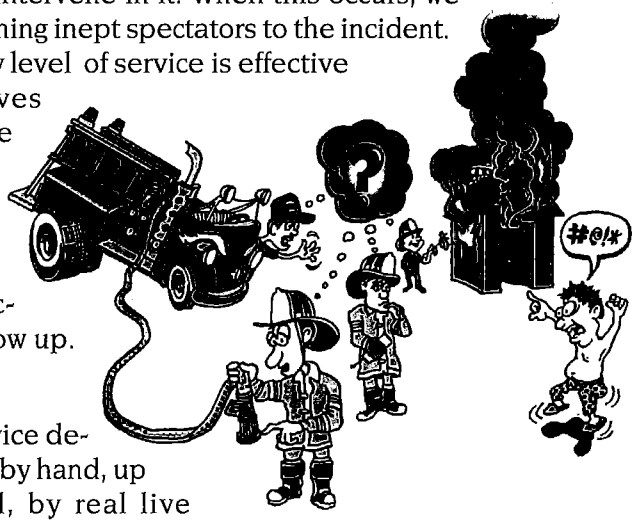
Quick



A major operational objective for our business is to arrive in time to interrupt the customer's problem while it's still in progress and interruptible. Maintaining this intervention response time capability is the entry price we must pay to get into the emergency service game — simply, if it ain't quick, it ain't emergency service and nothing else can make it so. A standard 911 customer expectation is that everyone and every part of the system will behave like the problem is an urgent event from the time we know about it until it's over. The process of reacting and performing quickly becomes a critical deployment objective throughout the incident. This is a major difference between being a firefighter and pumping gas and wiping windshields down at the Speedy Fill.

Effective

The other basic entry element we must come up with to get into and stay in the game is the very practical capability to consistently operate and perform in a manner that solves the incident problem. Speed and effectiveness form a critical partnership for us and the customer. Arriving quickly and being unable to perform puts us in the position to witness the event, not intervene in it. When this occurs, we are, in effect, dispatching inept spectators to the incident. The foundation of any level of service is effective execution that solves the problem. For fire department service delivery, added value (WOW!) can only occur after quick response and effective performance show up.

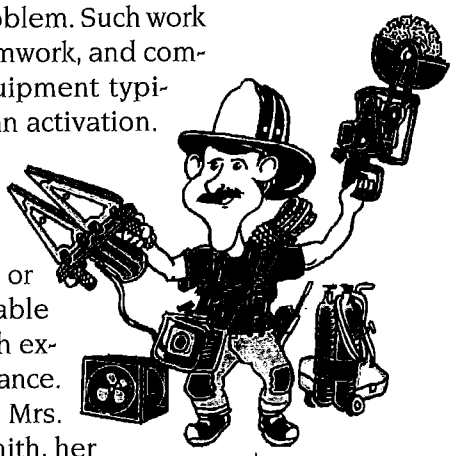


Skillful

Effective fire service delivery is mostly done by hand, up close and personal, by real live

Always attempt to execute a standard problem-solving outcome: quick\effective\skillful\safe\caring\managed.

firefighters who work directly to solve the customer's problem. Such work requires a high degree of personal skill, integrated teamwork, and command coordination. A lot of apparatus, tools, and equipment typically are involved in our work, but it all requires human activation. The biggest, baddest fire trucks and the fanciest tools in town don't mean beans if our humanoids can't operate them.



There aren't many camouflaged engine companies or ninja firefighters, so most of our work is very observable and done in public view. Even customers without much experience can identify poor performers and poor performance. Flubbed work wrecks both the customer's stuff (for Mrs. Smith) and the customer's confidence in us (for Mrs. Smith, her neighbors, friends, and anyone passing by). We must manage and maintain a human performance management system that consistently prepares, supports, coaches, reinforces, rewards, and improves WOW! skill levels in our firefighters. *Simply, it is impossible for our system to outperform the skill level of our members.*

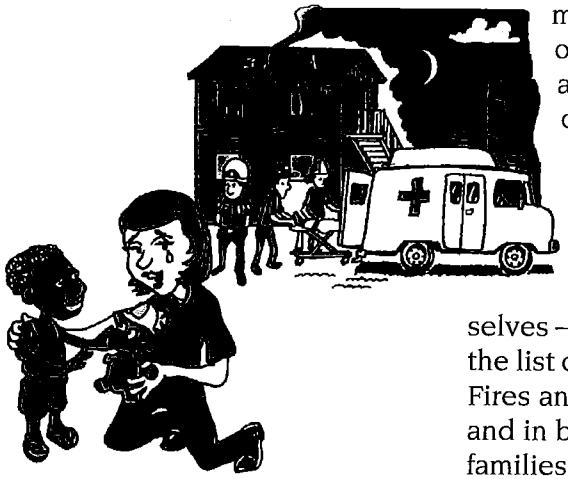
Safe

Firefighters must routinely work in hazardous areas to deliver service to customers whose bodies and stuff are being held hostage by a fire or other threats. We generally must get really close to the problem to solve it, and we can't control the setting where it occurs. If we could install handrails and a nonskid floor in Mrs. Smith's kitchen before she had a fire so that our firefighters would not slip and fall, we would also sprinkler her house so that when she leaves her pot on the stove a single head would open and zap the fire so that all we would have to do is chock a sprinkler and vacuum some water. Nothing will distract, disrupt, or derail our focus on delivering service any quicker than having a firefighter beat up, stuck, or missing. Simply, we can't do much about concluding Mrs. Smith's burning kitchen event while a paramedic is doing handstands on our chest, splinting our broken gazoo, or cooling our burned wazoo because we didn't protect ourselves or we did something really stupid.

We must capture the pieces of a response/operational safety and survival program and then consistently apply those components so that we can do our jobs in tough spots to solve the problem without becoming part of it. The customers expect us to protect ourselves so that we can go about the business of protecting them.

Caring

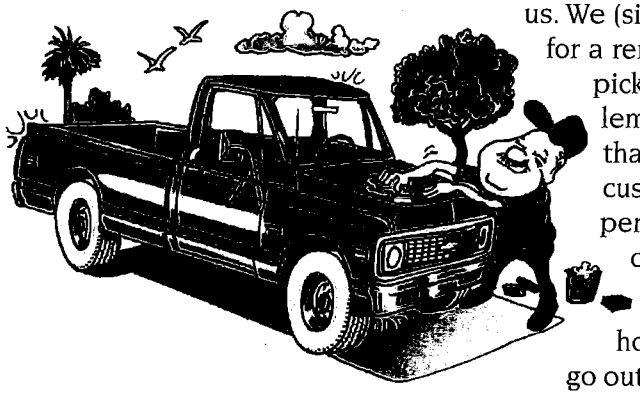
A fire department (or any other service organization) is a combination of two closely connected people games. The games involve the interplay between inside people and outside people. We call the inside people (us) firefighters — the outside people customers. The main reason the community maintains our inside response ability is to deliver service to the outside people who typically call us to solve urgent,



mostly hazard-caused problems. How the service gets delivered on the outside becomes a direct reflection of how the insiders are cared for within the organization. The organizational context of care closely resembles that of a fire service family. This context becomes important because when we deliver service it is pretty much always a family deal. Emergency problems occur to humans and their stuff in a way that is most always connected to a family. Very few of the folks who need our help are absolute Lone Ranger characters who are completely by themselves — in fact, those who are Lone Ranger types have being alone on the list of problems we are presented with when we connect with them. Fires and other emergencies occur in structures that are family homes and in business buildings that are owned by families and that support families. Virtually every response contact involves our fire service family helping a customer family. This reality sets up the interesting dynamic that the understanding, kindness, and support we receive (or don't receive) inside of our own family automatically becomes the basis of the treatment we extend to our customers. Like any other family, we are made up of the standard family elements — incumbents, roles, relationships, ranks, values, politics, ancestors, history, and culture. We have parents, kids, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and godparents (don't screw with them) — kids grow up to be parents, parents become grandparents. We have family rituals, funerals, reunions, feuds, gossip, and family stories — we grieve when a family member is injured or dies. We have family favorites, family outcasts, sheep of all colors, prodigal sons (and daughters), family nuts, and anointed ones. We create and control by extending rewards and administering discipline.

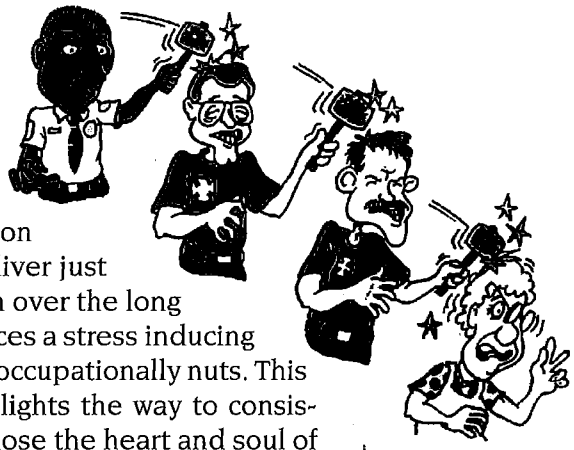
The family process makes us insiders and causes us as insiders (firefighters) to feel and act a certain way about the customers, the family, and ourselves. We have the capacity and opportunity to be both enormously kind and supportive or cruel and monstrously mean to other family members — when the family (department) gets wrecked, it almost always occurs from the inside, not the outside.

The family/organization wrecking process occurs when members lose the feeling of ownership for their department. When this occurs, they begin to blame others on the outside for our own breakdowns and difficulties. Leaders on every level should be alert for the universal signal of this process — excessive reference to "they." When this happens, we become tenants who inhabit an organization that no longer belongs to us. We (simply) lose interest in taking care of it (nobody ever cared for a rental car the way they did their own cream puff '72 Chevy pickup). Blaming everyone (and everything) else for our problems is dysfunctional, lame, and distracts us from the reality that we are the short-, medium-, and long-term owners and custodians of our department (family). We define our own personal and professional present and future by how we take care of ourselves, each other, and the customers.



A critical outcome of being a member of a family is how you act when you leave home; for us, this is when we go out in the street to deliver service to the customer. If the fire

department family is out of balance at home, there is a high probability that the service delivery event will be out of balance with the customer.... the current word to describe such screwed up families is dysfunctional. It becomes believable to deliver WOW! service on the outside if we receive WOW! care on the inside. Conversely, it's pretty illogical (actually goofy) for dysfunctional, abusing parents to drill the kids at home (dreary, unhappy place) to be nice to the neighbors' kids when they go out to play.



A negative internal organizational environment sets up a particularly difficult situation for firefighters who come from the factory naturally programmed to deliver good customer service and support. When these firefighters find themselves in a negative occupational situation, they (firefighters) become stuck between receiving lousy support and leadership on the inside, and being highly motivated to deliver just the opposite on the outside. Simply, it's tough over the long haul not to give back what you get. This produces a stress inducing bind that, over time, makes us personally and occupationally nuts. This is when the little light behind the eyes that lights the way to consistently doing the right thing goes dim, and we lose the heart and soul of our organization.

It's still pretty tough within our tall, skinny, vertical, old time, military model (system and mentality) to be overtly rude or revolutionary to your Jurassic Park monster boss. The longer the negative stuff goes on, the higher the possibility that we take out our frustrations at Mrs. Smith's kitchen fire. This is when and where we grab a Halligan Tool and the windows, interior finish, and pictures of little Billy on the coffee table substitute and take the hit for T-Rex Boss. The purpose of this little blivet of nickel psychology is not to justify frustrated firefighters becoming wrecking crews when they see their boss's scowling face in every piece of plate glass. It is only meant to describe both a reality that sadly still occurs in our business and the need to fix the problem where it actually occurs (family) and not where it pops out (Mrs. Smith's). The characteristic of caring becomes a defining event in our organization and directly effects how service will be delivered at show time. Like any family, the most critical dynamic and model of organizational caring is delivered by parents (bosses) to the kids (firefighters). This relationship produces independent, empowered, committed team member firefighters who get in between the customer and the problem and don't give up when things get tough. Good bosses

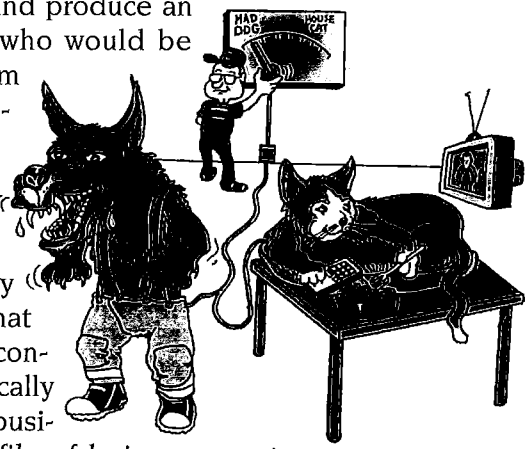
create a level of tough love that eliminates negative, weak-kneec bo out, bed-wetting snivelers who lean and never lift. Bosses create and maintain what happens inside the organization. They must also support workers that deal directly with the customer during critical service delivery situations. Bosses take responsibility themselves, expand authority in others, and set the stage for either good or bad.... follow mean kids home and you find mean parents.

The fire service family has another interesting and unique profile that complicates the process of us caring for each other. Firefighters are tough people who many times must do dangerous, dirty, demanding work to protect the customers and their stuff. How this work (combat) occurs becomes the very real backdrop of our day-to-day environment. Effective performance and successful survival within this environment requires our members to be aggressive, inner directed, ready, and able to fight.(!) This active, energetic firefighter profile is very functional and necessary when we must overcome (i.e., fight) episodic, fast-moving, hazardous situations. The same set of characteristics can produce difficult interpersonal relations within the family in a way that is fairly predictable and pretty simple. During nonresponse times (which is most of the time) when we are not expending our energy on a fire or other physical problem, it is fairly natural for us to look around for some other energy-absorbing substitute. Many times we select our brothers and sisters as such a substitute "shock absorber".... they are close, convenient, and familiar. When this occurs, we simply don't have a fire to beat up so we beat up each other (interpersonally).

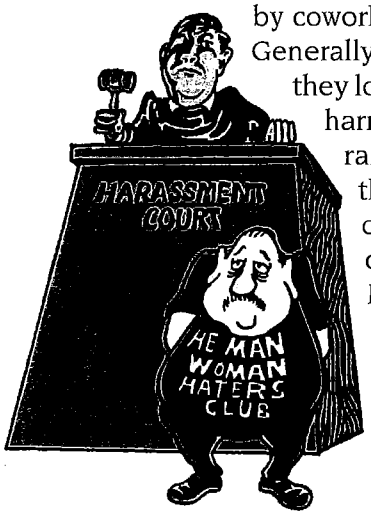
Historically, we have just expected and accepted this internal interaction as a normal and regular part of having a bunch of active, aggressive gladiators hanging around waiting to respond to the next unruly lion. Over time, how the gladiators treat each other becomes an important part of our ongoing culture. As young, entering firefighters live through being on the receiving end of the interpersonal abuse process (as a regular part of the organizational entry ritual), it becomes a normal expectation that such treatment just "comes with the job." Hope(?) for the future occurs when such young members, who are on the receiving end, realize that when they get additional seniority they can look forward to moving from the receiving end to the dishing-out side of the abuse festival. At that point (more seniority), the former recipients get to extend what they lived through to the next wave of entering members. As this process continues over time, it becomes genetically inevitable that we not only eat our young, but that we also create a goofy set of interpersonal reactions that many times we must live with for the remainder of that person's career.

Currently, the custodians of the personnel, legal, human relations, and public opinion system outside the fire service have put a new spin on this old-time practice. These outside folks have redefined some of our lovable traditional behaviors. The contemporary terms "harassment" and "hostile workplace" have grown out of this redefinition and are now common new words that have jumped into our regular vocabulary. Abusive interpersonal behavior that in the past would have been described as just stupid sport is now defined, if it occurs in certain ways, as ranging from politically incorrect to clearly illegal. Teasing, joking, pranking, and jesting naturally occur (a lot) in our service. Where that interaction relates to gender, age, race, ethnicity, physical characteristics, rank, assignment, experience (or lack of), personality profile, shortness (particularly vicious), or any and all other personal differences can now be in the foul zone if that treatment puts the individual on the receiving end at a disadvantage. Another part of the new deal is that the recipient (not the donor) gets to define what is (and what is not) funny and what is damaging to them personally.

The basic problem begins with our inability to order firefighters from central casting with a split-personality switch. If such a model was available, we could flip the switch in one position and produce an attack-trained, conditioned, and inclined worker who would be preprogrammed to aggressively and effectively maim and kill fire and actively solve any other physical problem. For routine, nonemergency times, like when the kids are sitting around the station watching educational TV and eating Waldorf salad, we could flip the switch in the other direction and get a sensitive, emoting, considerate individual who naturally and positively relates to his/her coworkers (and everyone else). What happens in the real world is that we get a complete, connected, unswitched person, who as a firefighter is typically highly inclined and ready (thankfully) to do the tough business of our business. We quickly fall into the profile of being a firefighter and become a reflection of that work (adrenaline directed, intense, lots of camaraderie, always different, exciting); simply, if you work in the street you become the street. Our challenge is to creatively combine the somewhat opposite sets of characteristics represented by the two sides of the switch to get the most out of both sets of very necessary inclinations and capabilities.



Our current internal relations vision must reflect a basic change that eliminates these damaging (and now in some cases illegal) traditional fire service interpersonal behaviors. The versatility and intelligence of our firefighters (who actually have a lot of switches) make this change highly possible. The adjustment must begin with organization leaders on every level establishing new, modern guidelines that describe that dysfunctional interpersonal behavior as clearly unacceptable. Everyone must be trained and given a chance to understand (in a new sense) how such behavior damages the human resources and spirit of the organization. This is the most important reason for us to change. When we injure each other, that damage lasts virtually forever. Every firefighter can remember, with painful clarity, situations where their feelings were hurt



by coworkers — in some cases, 30-40 years earlier. Generally, those who hurt their feelings were people they looked up to, and many were individuals the harmed person expected (by virtue of their rank, seniority, or stature) would protect them. Another important reason we should change involves what can happen to our department if we don't control ourselves. Many fire organizations where such harassment has not been managed internally are now being operated by someone in a black robe (ugghh). These are not happy places to come to work. Officers must do whatever is required to adjust behaviors in cases where harassment and abuse occur. The message must be very simple: If you engage in harassment, you cannot be part of our organization — period(.).

Harassment creates a self-imposed organizational limitation that we simply can't outperform. There is no way to mush harassment around and somehow make it okay. The only effective response is to eliminate it. Self-discipline is by far the best control. If the "selves" can't control it, then the bosses must. If the bosses can't control it, the Department of Justice will. The objective of eliminating harassment is to remove the damage and distraction that it creates so that we can go beyond breaking even and get into the WOW! zone.

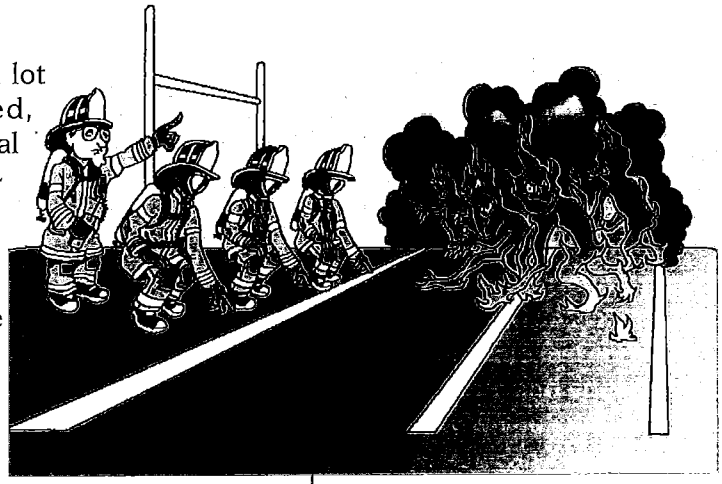
Eliminating harassment (very simply) improves the effectiveness of our human resources. This adjustment does not require we drop-kick the baby out of the tub — in fact, just the opposite. The absolute last thing the author (widely known as major fire service goof) would ever suggest is that we eliminate the teasing, joking, pranking, and jesting that goes on in our business. Removing that humor would wreck the soul of our service and would deprive us of the major capability we have to survive personally and organizationally. The author has always been at a distinct and happy disadvantage to appear as a stern disciplinarian because he is generally laughing at the latest humorous performance by some seriously and beautifully disturbed Phoenix firefighter. What now must occur is that we eliminate the hard, mean, ugly part of the junk that hurts us and leave the rest. By controlling ourselves in such a way, we bulletproof the safety of our internal environment so that we can get on with our own high-class, really funny, and sophisticated interpersonal relations.

The following are some basic observations about harassment:

- It always hurts us — inside and out.
- At some point, in some way, it will affect Mrs. Smith.
- If you have to ask (if it is harassment), simply don't do it.
- It's pretty easy to get out of balance.
- The receiver — not the sender — should decide if "the joke" is funny.
- Leaders must stop it — stopping it defines leaders (Big Time!).

- Some of the damage lasts forever.
- Don't ever approve of it.
- It's always expensive.
- If you did it — say you're sorry — don't do it anymore.
- Be nice.

Managed

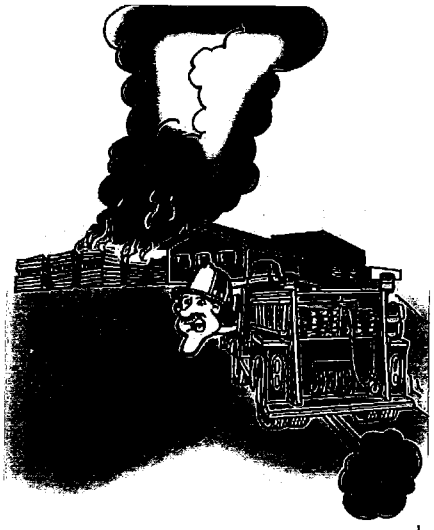


Firefighters play the service delivery game a lot like a sports team — fast, complicated, action-oriented, exciting. There is a lot of sequential activity that occurs simultaneously within a compressed time frame. Both teams (sports/fire) utilize a regular starting point, strong standard roles, well-practiced plays, clear (primitive) performance targets, and effective leadership and coaching. Like a sports team, our best outcomes are fast and dirty. It is fairly easy for the participants and spectators to evaluate the action....simply, if you understand the game and pay attention, you can keep score.

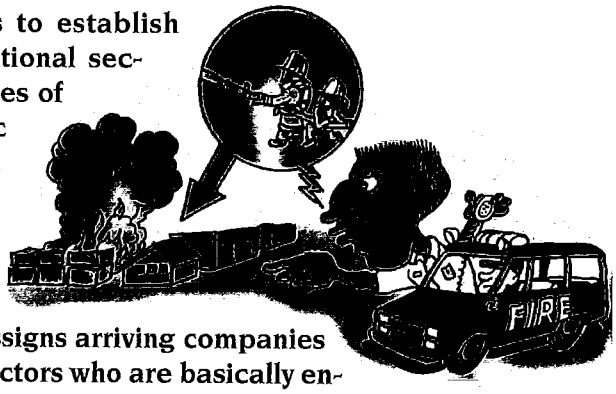
Effective team management requires a coaching system that provides a plan for before, during, and after the event. SOPs and training establish and teach the plays before the game. SOPs provide both the basic plan while the game is going on and the review/revision component that evaluates how the players and plays performed. Local experience (how the game came out) is used as the basis to then reinforce and revise as required to help the system match the current local landscape. This "plan it," "do it," "review it" approach requires we package and manage the organization to learn, unlearn, and relearn quickly, because the local landscape is dynamic, complicated, sometimes dangerous, and is currently filled with many exciting, fast-moving opportunities.

The customer gets a clear message and impression from watching the team perform about how the team is managed and whether the event/response is under control. This impression becomes a major customer confidence factor. Everyone has stood in line for an hour, dealt with a rude worker, or had something that was still fouled up after you paid to have it fixed up and wondered who (and where) in the world is the fool who is supposed to be managing this mess. The basic management objective is to have our team win because of the coaching and not in spite of it. Good coaching is almost invisible to the customer — good service is enormously obvious.

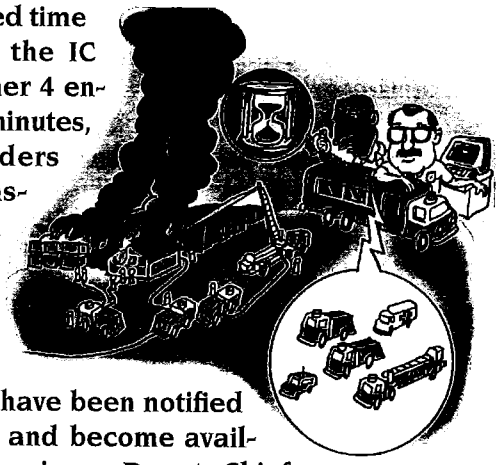
Mr. Smith owns and operates a very active wood products (production) company that makes big-boy wood stuff — large wire spools, pallets, bracing, shoring, overseas packing crates, etc. His facility is in an urban industrial area. The whole complex occupies an entire city block and includes a large production structure (open shed), an office building, and what is (in effect) a lumber yard.



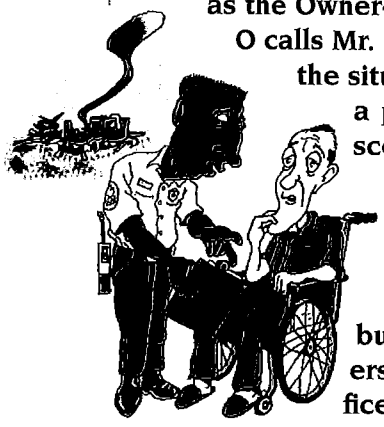
A major fire occurs at 1:30 a.m. in stacks of lumber. The fire also exposes and then involves the office building. We receive a 911 call and immediately dispatch a first-alarm structural fire response — 4 engines, 2 ladders, 1 medic, 1 command van, and 2 Battalion Chiefs. Our first-arriving company reports a deep-seated fire involving 100' x 150' of closely stacked lumber, plus the fire has extended to the interior of the well-involved 50' x 60' office building. The first officer assumes "Lumber Yard Command" (IC) and strikes a second alarm (4 more engines and 2 more ladders).



The IC begins to establish geographic operational sectors on all four sides of the fire. Their basic objective is to get in between what's burning and what is not burning to somehow keep it that way. The IC assigns arriving companies to the operating sectors who are basically engaged in a big-time, fast-and-dirty water fight, using large caliber ground and elevated master streams (surround and drown).



At the ten-minute elapsed time notification (from Alarm), the IC strikes a third alarm (another 4 engines and 2 ladders). At 30 minutes, all 12 engines and 6 ladders (plus support staff) are assigned, working, integrated into the incident action plan, and operating in a standard defensive manner. At 20 minutes into the event, off-duty officers who have been notified begin to arrive. They stage and become available for assignment. The IC assigns a Deputy Chief as the Owner-Occupant Support Sector Officer (O/O). The O/O calls Mr. Smith on his cellular phone, basically describes the situation, and asks him to respond. They establish a place where they will meet on the edge of the scene. When Mr. Smith arrives, the O/O meets him, gets him through the police line, takes him on a tour, describes the incident action plan, and they begin to discuss a recovery plan.

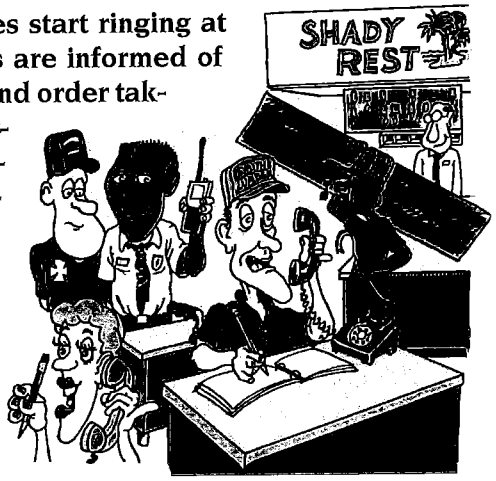


Mr. Smith indicates that the majority of his business is received from regular (repeat) customers over the telephone. The O/O indicates the office is basically toast and that all of Mr. Smith's tele-

phones are now resting in AT&T heaven. The O/O contacts the fire department communications personnel (who actively deal with telephone people, places, and things). The commo guys wake up and begin to deal with Mr. Smith's telephone company (it's now 3:30 a.m.). The basic commo plan is to do whatever is required to cause the telephones to ring in a temporary office at 8:00 a.m.

The O/O calls Alarm and they begin to research and make contact with the closest motel to the scene to begin to coordinate and secure a place where Mr. Smith can set up a temporary office at the start of the business day (in 4 hours at 8:00 a.m.). Alarm makes a deal with the local Shady Rest Motel for two adjoining rooms. Resource Management (F.D.) moves folding tables and chairs into the temporary office. Our commo guys hook up cellular phones and coordinate switching over Mr. Smith's business numbers to ring at the Shady Rest.

Mr. Smith calls his supervisors and has them come to the incident site. They are briefed and discuss a plan to call workers at 6:00 a.m. to meet at the training room of the closest fire station to the scene (1 mile) at 7:00 a.m. This occurs — everyone is briefed and a basic plan is developed. The office workers go to the Shady Rest; the production crews go to the yard and begin to sort out what will be required to resume production — electric service, surviving lumber, damage to equipment, etc.



At 8:00 a.m., the phones start ringing at the Shady Rest. Customers are informed of the fire, orders are taken, and order takers extend the normal delivery time. Customers are understanding and wish everyone well. The O/O stays with Mr. Smith throughout most of the day and serves as the liaison between the fire event and the recovery plan. The O/O assists in renting and moving a portable office (two construction-type mobile home units) into the yard so that the temporary Shady Rest operation can move back home.

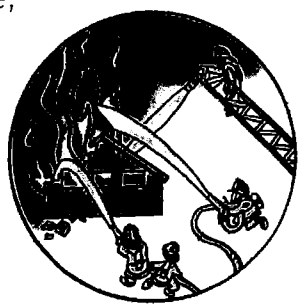
The next morning, fire department investigators move their mobile office (motor home) to the scene. They establish contact with Mr. Smith's insurance adjusters to begin to describe and document event details so that fire debris in the yard can begin to be cleared away and damage to the office can be evaluated. The fire department video unit shoots the entire scene (including overall God's-eye shots from a helicopter) to record a description of geography and damage. All video is made available to adjusters. Investigators remain on the scene

to continue to determine cause and origin and to assist adjusters. Both investigators and adjusters use the investigations mobile office facilities, phones, fax, etc. to create quicker recovery for Mr. Smith.

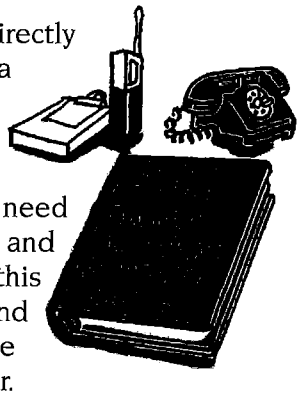
Let's use this event to compare the old fire-fighting-only days with the combined new-fire-fighting-and-customer-service approach. The author has attended (like most old firefighters) a lot of lumber yard fires. In the old days that's how they sold lumber — in old fashioned lumber yards. Today, it's all retailed in big, huge sales buildings by companies that have Club or Depot in their name. The buildings are glitzy, well-lit, sprinklered, and staffed by friendly "sales associates" in distinctive orange vests. In the old lumber yards, the guys who waited on you (?) were old carpenters with half their fingers missing. You had better speak carpenterese if you wanted to have a good day with them. The old lumber yards were big, fairly messy, and they generally had a beat-up old chain link fence around them. They typically had a lot of fires. When we had such a fire, we would call a mob of our colleagues, have a muster, and essentially put on a water festival. Generally, the owner would show up sometime during the fire fight (if he could get through the police line). He probably responded because some neighbor called him. We would sit him on the curb across the street and when either the fire or the water won, we would roll up the supply lines, say "so long" to Mr. Owner, and go home. In those days, our focus was on the fire fight and did not really include the customer. We were not being mean; it's just the way we did business.

Let's look at Mr. Smith's fire as an example of adding a customer service component to a regular fire fighting job:

- We conducted a standard old-time, low-tech, heavy-duty fire operation. We spoke to a big fire in the only language it will ever understand — big water. Jumbo stacks of burning stuff (like lumber) don't come gift wrapped for the fire department, so we had better be prepared to pump and apply lots of water. It has always been and will always be so.

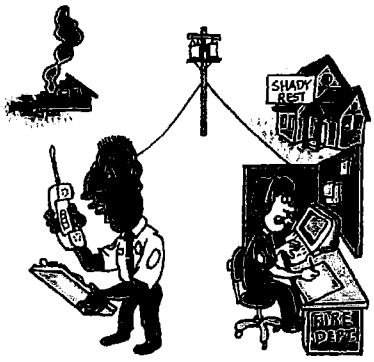


- We designated someone (O/O) to deal directly with Mr. Smith early in the event. This is a regular part of our incident command structure. We had planned, organized, practiced, and refined it (O/O) before the event — all the IC had to do was to ID the need and assign it — Bamo, O/O is in business and dealing with Mr. Smith (the customer) — this requires a major change in our mentality and approach. In the old days, we treated the burning lumber like it was the customer. Now, the lumber comes with Mr. Smith who is the customer — not the other way around.

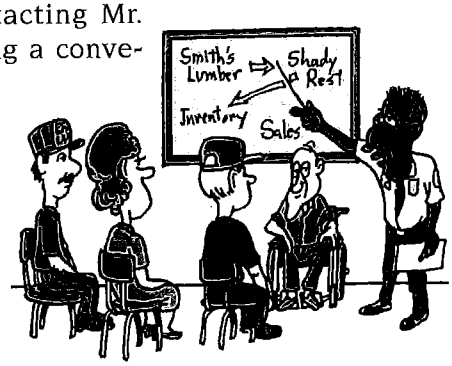


- The O/O called Mr. Smith, met him, gave him a tour and a briefing about what was going on. Mr. Smith received his exclusive attention. Together, they developed a plan for what to do next to keep Mr. Smith going. This approach creates a strong customer service beginning.

- The O/O did some standard recovery/support/assistance things to help Mr. Smith. He used regular fire department resources and capabilities to set up a temporary office and a way for the phones to ring. This got Mr. Smith up and operating with no business interruption.



- The O/O coordinated contacting Mr. Smith's employees, arranging a convenient meeting place, and assisted in briefing them on the situation. They had a chance to discuss and decide on a next step plan to keep the business going. This provided a lot more effective and sensible way to start on what was going to be a pretty confusing and traumatic day.



- Our investigators facilitated the front end of the adjustment process with the insurance company. The business was (obviously) seriously disrupted, and their support streamlined and shortened how quickly the initial recovery could begin.

All that adding a customer service element to a regular (old-time) operation cost us was a really minor amount of our people, resources, and time plus 3 dozen donuts and 4 pots of coffee for the meeting at our fire station with the workers. We started helping a fire customer before we had set up all the ladder pipes, and that planned customer assistance did not in any way slow down, interfere, or interrupt the pipes going up. Mr. Smith is a smart, capable businessman who would have figured out by himself everything he had to do to keep going in about

48 hours. It would have taken him this long only because this was his first (and hopefully last) fire event. We figured out and practiced what to do to help fire customers way before the fire occurred because Mr. Smith pays us to make that assistance and support our business....simply, he paid for WOW! service and he received that service.

4.

Regard everyone as a customer.

It's pretty easy to develop tunnel vision when we deliver service because we are inclined to be highly preoccupied with and focused on the direct customer and their environment. While we should always give the customer our undivided attention (another item in this essay), we should realize that we are always on stage and that we are typically exposed to a lot of people.

A progressive change in our mentality (and approach) involves regarding everyone we encounter, both directly and indirectly, as a person who is our customer. This expanded customer consideration includes the person who receives our service directly and anyone who knows and is closely connected to that customer like family, neighbors, friends, or associates. This group generally has an intense interest, emotional connection, and personal concern for the welfare of the person receiving direct service and the effect and outcome of the emergency event. These people are very much an integral part of the incident, and we should treat them in a positive way and include them in our customer service incident action plan (respect, kindness, consideration, patience).

Family members are a very special group that many times require more attention than the main incident problem or customer. Family members become intensely involved, interested, and emotionally connected when a loved one is injured, sick, or threatened in any way. Situations that involve children or elderly relatives particularly require increased sensitivity on the part of our members. Many times the actual incident problem is very straightforward and solvable, but the reaction and involvement of family members requires another "treatment" focus and approach. Officers should include family members in their initial evaluation and develop an incident action plan for dealing with the entire family. The way we handle family members (either good or bad) creates a lasting memory and feeling.

As an example, every fire company has responded to a young mother whose kiddo fell down, bumped their head, and looked a little goofier than normal. She panics and calls 911 shrieking that little Throckmorton is having a cranial vapor lock. By the time we arrive the little devil is (thankfully) swinging from the chandeliers, but Mom is a basket case. The incident challenge then is to somehow calm her down while the kid is outside flipping toggle switches and blowing the air horn on the engine. What she will remember and what she will say once her brain waves

normalize is that she is embarrassed that she called us, but how nice (considerate/patient) the firefighters were to her personally. Such customers are not medical professionals (obviously) but they can recognize and will tell everyone they know what being treated by pros feels like.

The standard service delivery plan for effectively dealing with family members must include basic stuff like describing the situation, explaining our actions, determining their needs, and providing whatever service is needed to help them reconnect their lives. Developing an overall Department family support plan for how we will provide such services as making contact with family members, transporting family members as required to keep the family together, connecting with social, counseling, and support services and other community resources provides a strong ahead-of-time framework for fire companies to operate within. Simply, we must develop the resources and techniques to "treat" the entire scene, and family members are an integral and important part of that scene.

Many times the direct recipient of our service is in La La Land and will not remember anything about us except what their family tells them when they return to reality. In these situations, how we treat family members becomes the central focus of how we are remembered and how that family evaluates and relates the quality (basically, how nice we were) of our service. In these cases, the stories of how we delivered service to the Smiths becomes a part of that family's folklore and gets handed down to little Smiths as they hear the story re-told around the dinner table.

Another group we must consider is anyone close to the incident who is indirectly connected to the customer (who is receiving service) and the situation, like bystanders and spectators. This group typically does not know the direct customer. They watch what is going on and what we are doing because it is interesting and exciting to them. Their presence can be frustrating to us, particularly when they congest and obstruct the scene and our operations. We should develop, apply, and refine a plan to manage them in a positive way that gently moves them to a safe area and leaves a positive impression. The arrival of spectators should not be a big surprise to us — after all, we blasted everyone and everything within five miles with an enormous level of noise and blinking/flashing/strobing lights....not exactly a covert response.

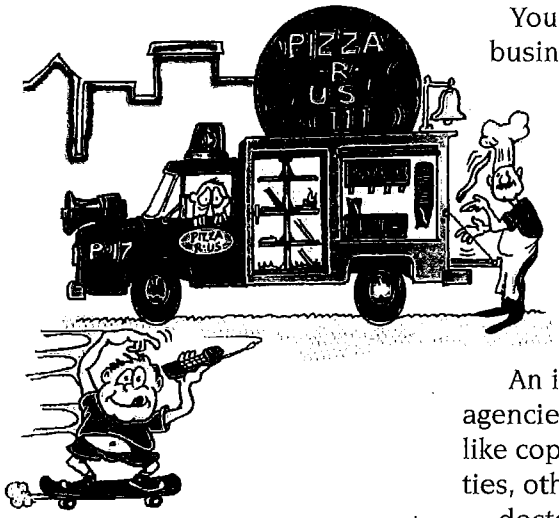
Another group we should plan for and consider in our customer service game plan is the Good Samaritans who are somehow involved in

and working on the incident problem before we arrive. These friendly helpers are typically giving aid and support to injured customers or those intrepid souls who have a garden hose on their neighbor's garage to keep the burning house from extending to Mrs. Smith's Nash Rambler. Many times they become part of the problem because they get to the incident early and, in some way, expose themselves to the incident hazard — simply, their motivation and good intentions can be way ahead of their safety training and survival procedures. Their hearts are always in the right place and the way we "take over" the event can either hurt their feelings or positively connect them to us and what we do next.

A real simple command/action transfer plan might include making positive contact with them (Good Sams), asking what has occurred and what action they have taken, and then listening to and acknowledging what they say. We should always check and verify their welfare (both physical and psychological). In some cases where these cooperatives are effectively (and safely) in place and doing good, let them continue to help us. It also makes sense to do a real simple, quick "credentials check" to find out who they are. It isn't real smart to blow off an orthopedic trauma surgeon so that we can deal with a broken leg (we really shouldn't blow off anyone). Another big (huge) deal is for us to simply thank them for what they have done. We should always secure the required details to record on incident reports and for a department citizen's award in positive situations. Imagine if we managed Good Samaritans in such a positive and encouraging way that we created an epidemic of people helping others in tough situations — what a WOW! outcome.

The motorists and pedestrians we meet responding to and returning from the incident create another (potentially large) group who we routinely encounter and who are a very critical part of the response process. These response neighbors are connected to us as captive spectators along the way who develop an impression about us and a reaction to us that is closely connected to our mutual safety and survival. We may expose ourselves to literally hundreds of people during our response to deliver service to a single person. Simply, how we drive our apparatus sends a message that we are either careful professionals or insane daredevils. We have high profile visibility wherever we go, and whatever we do attracts interest and attention during both routine and emergency times. Just the fact that we have shown up creates a certain amount of community disruption and commotion. Our apparatus is big, brightly colored, lit up, noisy, and many times we travel in a response mob. We make ourselves very obvious on purpose. The characteristics that cause people to notice us and get out of our way (hopefully) set the stage for widespread interest in us. Our presence indicates an event and intervention is underway, and normal people quickly recognize us and connect our presence with something at least potentially exciting going on.

This socialization starts early with kids playing with toy fire trucks that become a familiar and affectionate form/symbol to them. Most parents don't have the kid checked if he/she says at four years old that they want to become a firefighter when they grow up (some of us never outgrow that adolescent career plan.)



You don't have to wonder very long about what any other service business would give for our market position (besides us being a monopoly). Ask Pizza R' Us if they would like to have prepaid pizzas, a highly advertised three-digit phone number, legal permission to make deliveries code three with all warning devices blaring, blinking, and blasting (so your pistachio and tutti-frutti pie is always hot), and to have every kid in town playing with a toy pizza delivery truck from the time they can gurgle "Pepperoni and extra cheese, Mommy"....they want it, and we've got it!

An important group we must consider our customers are the other agencies we routinely deal with when we deliver service. They are folks like cops, EMS personnel (if we don't deliver the whole package), utilities, other city departments — like Streets, Traffic, Water, Public Works — doctors, nurses, and other hospital personnel.

We are closely connected to these people and their agencies and our relationship shifts based on the needs and details of each event. Sometimes we extend service to them and they are the customer. Other times we receive their service and we are the customer. Our willingness to customize our service to their needs when they are the customer gives us a practical opportunity to set the stage in a positive way for when we become customers and are on the receiving end.

It makes big sense to develop a relationship with them and a plan for how to effectively play together way before the game. Strong partnerships are the product of mutual inclusion in the entire program management package: developing interagency SOPs, training together, reserving a seat in the Command Post, conducting interagency critiques, sharing credit (and blame), along with continual revising and fine tuning based on experience and new info.

Every agency can do their job/specialty best. When we combine capability we all get stronger. Replace "I'm in charge here" with "What can I do to help?" Develop and practice strong relationships — not the reverse. You go first — rent the hall, send out the invitations, print an agenda, bring the donuts, listen a lot, take notes, clean up afterward, and then print and distribute the minutes. Pretty soon getting along and being nice becomes a habit.

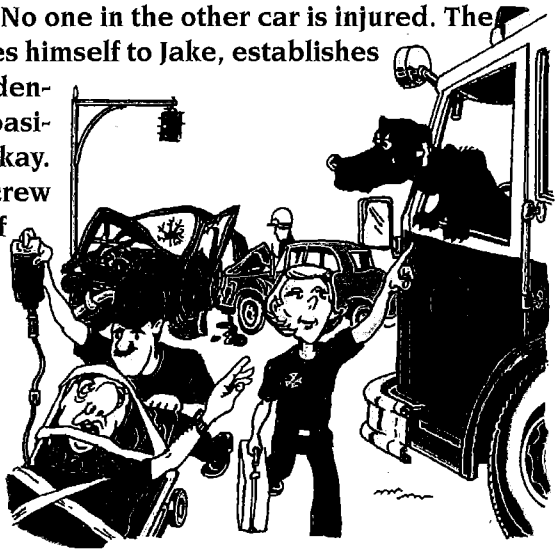
Everyone in the community recognizes us, has at least some interest in what we do, and basically starts out (life) with the positive feeling that we are the friendly helpers you call when something hurts. We should regard our community profile as a unique opportunity. The clear message in this opportunity is not to disqualify anyone from being a customer candidate just because they are not a direct service recipient. We have the opportunity to consistently create a positive impression, feeling, perception, and memory wherever we are and with whomever we encounter. The starting point for us to expand our positive image is to use an inclusive customer definition as the foundation for developing a strategy to continually improve how we present ourselves in the community. We will discuss such a strategy in Section 5 which comes next....keep readin'.

Regard everyone as a customer.

Roscoe Smith (Mrs. S's uncle) and Jake go for a ride in their 1962 Studebaker. Roscoe is a 185-pound, 67-year-old retired steel worker. Jake is a 42-pound reformed car-chasing canine of mixed, but noble, parentage. Roscoe and Jake have been close associates since the very beginning of Jake's puppyhood.

As usual, Roscoe is driving and Jake is riding shotgun. They are both listening to Willy sing about his wasted youth on the AM. During their ride, an inattentive driver in a full-size sedan "busts" a stop sign and T-bones the old Studebaker in an intersection. The collision seriously injures Roscoe. Jake is shaken up but okay.

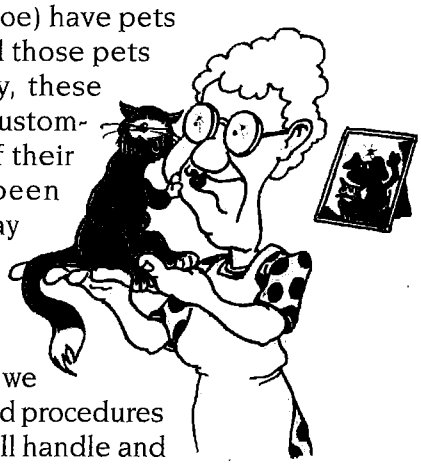
We receive a 911 call about the accident, dispatch an ALS engine, a ladder company for extrication, and an ambulance. Upon arrival, the engine Captain assumes command, quickly evaluates the situation, coordinates extrication, and assigns the medics to Roscoe. No one in the other car is injured. The Captain then introduces himself to Jake, establishes positive rapport, and identifies that the dog is basically uninjured and okay. The Captain has the crew put Jake in the cab of the engine and instructs the engineer to maintain an awareness of his security and welfare. Roscoe (who is still conscious) indicates to the medics he is very concerned about Jake. They reassure him that the pooch is all right and not to worry — they will take care of him. After extrication, Roscoe is stabilized and packaged for transport. The medics and ambo crew then take him to the closest trauma center. The engine and ladder crews secure the scene and the engine Captain indicates to the police IC that he and his crew will transport Jake to the neighborhood veterinarian for an exam and boarding. The Captain calls ahead to the vet's office, gives them a brief description of what has happened, and makes Jake a reservation for a nonsmoking single with a view. The vet's office confirms the reservation and says to come ahead with Jake and they will be waiting for him. The Captain and the remaining crew members deliver Jake to the vet on the engine. The trip is approximately 1-1/2 miles. They check Jake in, give the office staff a description of the accident, and indicate Roscoe's hospital details. The crew also tells the staff how to contact them if they can assist Jake in any way.



The Captain has told the medics to call him before they leave the hospital. They do and the Captain gives them the

name, location, and phone number of the vet's office. The medics have the hospital staff include that information on Roscoe's medical records and ask them to reassure Roscoe that Jake is okay and being looked after by the vet. The next shift, the crew calls the vet's office to check on Jake. The vet indicates he is in good condition and is a very well-behaved guest. The engine and ambo routinely do business with the local trauma center where Roscoe is recovering. On their first (of many) trips to the facility on their next shift, they look in on Roscoe (who is recovering) to be certain he has received a status report on Jake. Roscoe is happy to see the crew and thanks them (profusely) for taking care of Jake. Roscoe proudly tells the crew Jake's life story from puppy to the present. The crew agrees that Jake is a noble specimen, says, "so long", and returns to the station.

In ten days, Roscoe is released from the hospital, able to get around and drive his backup Studebaker. On his first excursion, he picks up Jake at the vet's, visits the local doughnut shop, and takes a gigantic box of dough balls by the station. The crew is pleased to see them both and they all have a happy reunion. They (Roscoe and Jake) thank the crew again for their help and kindness, hop in the Studie, and drive away listening to the Hag grapple with the dilemma of whether the character he is singing about actually has a drinking problem or is just a man whose problems cause him to drink. Roscoe later writes a letter to the Fire Chief describing how the crew went above and beyond, directly to WOW! The Fire Chief prepares an exceptional performance unit citation that reinforces the department's policy of providing exceptional service to both human and animal customers and thanks them for being so nice.



Many of our customers (like Roscoe) have pets (like Jake) and they generally regard those pets as members of their family. Simply, these pets come along with the human customers and are a very important part of their lives. Every firefighter who has been around a while has had a customer say "my baby's still inside" to later discover the "baby" is a 15 year-old cat named Bartholomew.

The point of this pet essay is that we should develop a policy and the related procedures that describe the details of how we will handle and manage our customer's pets when they become involved in an emergency incident. The procedures should clearly state that firefighters should sensibly regulate the risks involved in rescuing pets (no power line, tree, or heavy fire rescues). The procedures should detail how we will secure and protect animals, how we will transport injured animals for treatment, and how we will respectfully manage dead

animals. Such procedures could range from the department doing pet management themselves to having the local animal control agency or the humane society assist. Developing an ahead-of-time arrangement with the local veterinarian community to assist also makes sense. Vets are very typically really nice people who love animals, and most will assist and support fire department operations where pets are involved.

5.
Consider how you and what you are doing looks to others.

As previously stated (over and over) every part of our system is firefighter driven and directed. This includes how we look to the customers — as individuals and as an organization.

This impression is created and maintained by the direct and indirect impression and feeling the customers develop in response to the appearance, performance, and behavior of our members. Simply, we create a human customer reaction in response to how our human firefighters look and what we are doing (human/human).

Our image must be planned and managed at the point and moment the customer impression is created. We never get that opportunity back — the deodorant ad says "you never get a second chance to make a first impression" (they ought to know).

The firefighter in control of that customer impression becomes, in effect, our department image maker. This creates the very practical reality that the really high impact of our customer contact system is the human part. This quickly shows that our firefighters are directly in control of the customer service delivery experience. It also shows that fire department managers have no real capability (and hopefully no inclination) to guard the customers from the firefighters.

If we examine the way we are organized and structured to deliver service, there is only one way we can effectively support our human resources (firefighters). That is to develop a simple customer service plan, to train our firefighters on the plan, and to depend on and trust them to directly execute the plan properly, where and when the customer service opportunity occurs.

The general objective of the positive image plan is to create the consistent customer observation and opinion that we are professional, under control, functionally focused, serious, effective, and friendly. When we show up, we should look like we are there to do business, like we know our business, and that we mean business.

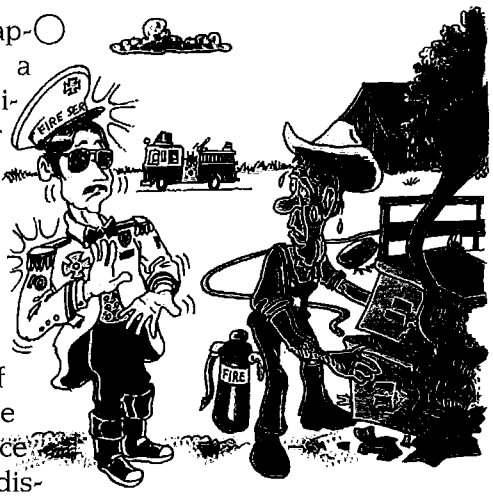
The parts of a plan to create and maintain a positive department appearance and image include the following basic elements:

- Members
- Facilities

- Fire apparatus, tools, and equipment
- Presence/behavior

Members

Individual firefighter appearance creates an important first impression that becomes the unspoken introduction and beginning for the event. This includes the old-fashioned stuff like well-maintained uniforms, grooming, fitness, overall bearing, and stature. Having a fire department team show up all looking alike (that's why we call 'em uniforms), shaved, combed, standing tall, awake, and generally looking like they are serious is a pretty smart way to start doing business with the customer.



Our personal/organizational appearance should be part of a planned strategy to create a positive initial and ongoing customer impression and reaction. We don't have to wear epaulets and tuxedo pants to create that positive impression. Our customers are smart enough to know that what we do to solve their problem generally involves some amount of skillful manual labor — so we should try to look like smart, nice people who are dressed neatly; distinctively identified with both our name and our department colors; and ready to go to work. Once the event is underway, we don't get to trade anything for our appearance, but it "gets us in the door."

The basic objective is to create the long-term identity and feeling within the community that when a customer sees a uniformed firefighter, he/she is one of us, and they can trust that person to be in their bedroom at 3:00 a.m. to deliver medical services to their family and for them to know that it's really okay for us to have a lockbox key on the dash of Engine One that lets us into every bank in town.

While our uniforms reflect the individual and diverse history, tradition, style, and approach of each department, today (in the author's opinion) understated appearance is probably better than overstated. A nonmilitary/nonpolice appearing uniform may create a more positive and friendly reception and may be actually safer in the violent, nutty environment our troops must currently deliver service in.

Well-marked, distinctive tee shirts, golf shirts, and sweat shirts create a relaxed, professional look and feeling and clearly identifies us as firefighters, not police officers, airline pilots, or Italian marching band leaders. Such uniforms send more of a message that we are ready for action (like an athlete) rather than to control (like a police officer).

They lend themselves to silk screening our department name on the back so that every member becomes a mobile department billboard. "T-shirt management" is popular with our members based on being practical, comfortable, and sensible.

Consider how you and what you are doing looks to others.

Uniforms are a big deal because they give us pride, identity, indicate a critical community function, and connect us to important department and fire service traditions. Showing up looking like the New York Yankees produces a lot different effect than showing up looking like a cross between a rock band and an itinerant carnival crew. A lot of times we act out how we look.

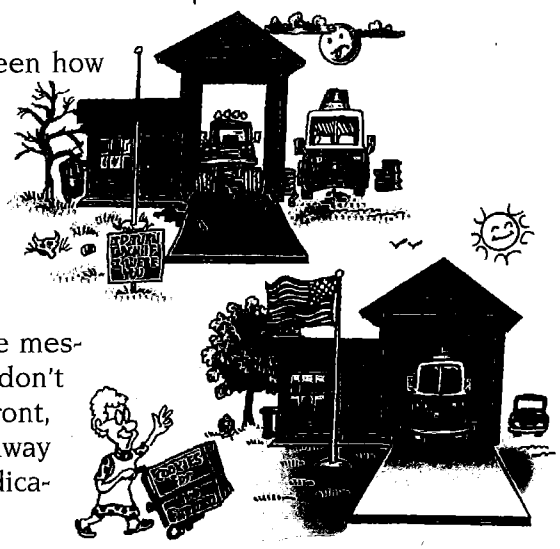
Facilities

The part of our organizational operetta where the fat lady starts singing is the scene where the firefighters and the customers come together. If you closely watch the show, you quickly see that customers are continuously surrounded by a complicated, many times mean-spirited, dangerous, and unpredictable environment. In addition to our human resources, we utilize a lot of facilities, apparatus, and mechanical/electronic stuff to effectively protect them when that complex environment jabs them, pokes them, falls on them, burns around them, captures them, or when the denizens of that environment get ugly with each other.

Short response time management requires we locate and house ourselves throughout the community in decentralized facilities that physically place us close to the customer (B. Franklin invention). This geographic dispersion game plan necessarily places fire stations inside the neighborhoods they protect. This location approach causes us to be an integral part and presence in that local place. Over time, Mrs. Smith becomes familiar and comfortable with "her fire station" located down on the corner. As she sees us actually living in "her" fire station, she develops a quiet confidence that we are close, we are easy to reach, and that we will respond quickly if she needs help because we are located right down the street.

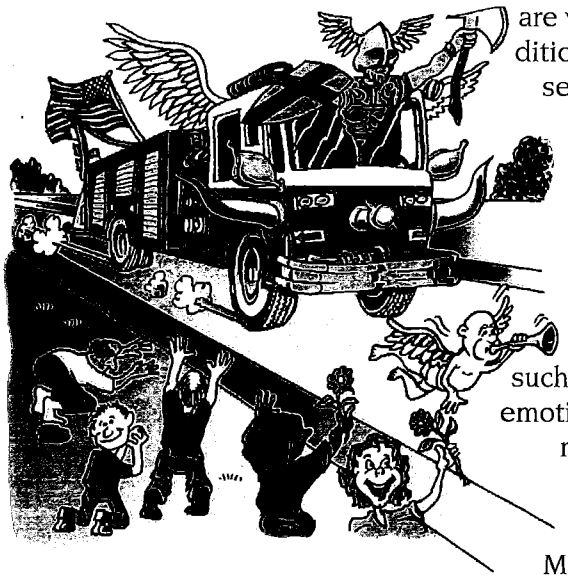
Occupying a neighborhood fire station provides the customer easy access and an ongoing opportunity to view, evaluate, and develop a judgment of how well that facility is being operated. The fact that the station is a public building also gives that customer the right to make that judgment. We develop about the same set of relationships as any other neighbor and also are evaluated like any other family who lives down the block. The first (and easiest) way we will be evaluated will relate to the outside appearance of the station.

Our customers will naturally make a connection between how we will deliver service (to them as a customer) and how we take care of our house. This is not complicated or mysterious — we have all driven (hungrily) past a junky looking diner based on a concern that the same guy who takes care (?) of the outside of the joint might also be in charge of washing dishes and cleaning up the kitchen. Just like uniforms, we can't trade anything for a neat looking facility, but a positive appearance creates a nice introduction and sends the message that we are proud to be part of the hood. While we don't have to maintain a manicured, formal English garden out front, having a well-maintained station, with the yard squared away and the flag flying right side up, is a simple and practical indication that the lights are on and someone is home.



Consider how you and what you are doing looks to others.

Fire Apparatus, Tools, and Equipment



Fire trucks are another dead give away that we are hanging around and doing business. Our apparatus is an important source of identity and pride and indicates our special customer service mission. Our rigs are very distinctive looking and decorated in highly symbolic and traditional ways. A well-designed and maintained fire machine inherently sends a positive, action-oriented message to the world that we are ready, willing, and able to hit the road and handle the customer's problem.

The way we maintain our apparatus is another indicator of how we feel about our mission. Watching a highly detailed piece of full-dress fire apparatus responding "under steam" (all warning devices activated) with a crew that looks like they are ready to go to work is truly a religious experience. Anyone not impressed with such a WOW! response spectacle is suffering a serious psychological/emotional deficit and should be quickly evaluated and given shock treatment. Fire trucks are Godlike vehicles that should always be overmaintained as a labor of love (personal and professional) so that they can protect good and fight evil.

Many times protecting the customer (and fighting evil) requires us to perform functions that involve tools and equipment. The tools of our trade are highly versatile and range from Frankenstein-like-primitive, manual, and mechanical forcible entry/access tools to highly sophisticated electronic medical equipment. When a particular tool is required to perform a particular function, it must be used quickly, skillfully, and under control.

The feedback loop of our work is painfully short — almost instantaneous — so if the firefighter can't make the tool work, or if the tool conks out, the operation generally stops, but the problem goes on. Anyone and everyone watching us operate will quickly identify if the tool/worker process was a hit or a miss. Our operations require (first) a steady stream of adequate, appropriate tool use that (second) produces a steady stream of completed work steps that integrate and move toward solving the overall incident problem.

Our tools are typically well designed/constructed, functional, rugged, action-oriented, high tech or very basic to match the job. They are very impressive. Watching skilled firefighters use such tools to extricate a trapped motorist customer or jump start a shorted-out medical customer isn't any different than watching a skilled carpenter construct a roof assembly or a snooty waiter deftly prepare a Caesar salad (with extra anchovies, please).

Presence/Behavior

The ecstasy (and sometimes agony) of being a firefighter is showing up in the morning, stashing your banana suit on Big Red, checking your mask, getting your first cup of starter fluid, and then taking on anything and everything that occurs in your franchise area during your watch. Some of the nonurgent activity can be scheduled during that tour by us, but the active (urgent) service delivery part is mostly scheduled by Mrs. Smith's emergency. Simply, we don't get to make an appointment with

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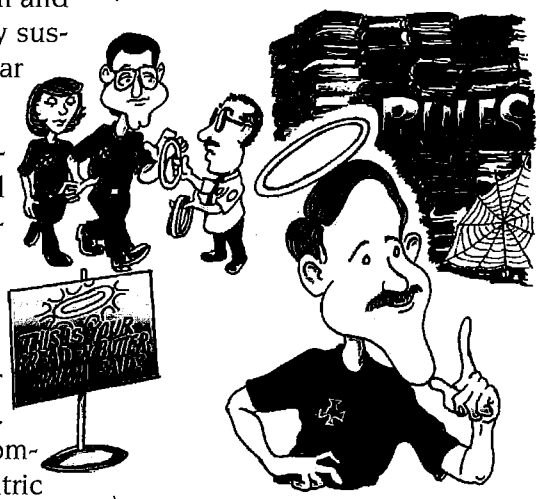
her to have her kitchen fire occur at a time that fits in between physical fitness and prefire planning.

The unscheduled, episodic characteristic of fire department work is a major attraction and a big reason why most of us psychos become firefighters. This reality makes being a firefighter a lot different than working down at the Tastee Freeze or the Ajax Manufacturing Company....both fine and essential organizations, just different (in that way) from us.

A major management challenge is how to construct practical, useful direction to help our troops maintain an effective appearance, stature, and the functional behaviors that consistently produce a positive appearance and impression as they go through their mix and match tour of duty. One way we use to create some of that direction involves the development and application of standard operating procedures (which has its own section later on). These procedures provide the organizational and operational basis (generally in some detail) for how we conduct business. They are designed to provide a common starting point and approach for executing standard operations in fairly standard situations. While they are very helpful in providing direction and to effectively connect the team, it would be virtually impossible to construct absolute guidelines for how firefighters conduct themselves to create a positive impression in every possible unstructured, nonstandard, and unusual situation they routinely become involved in.

Based on the exciting backdrop of where, when, and how we do our work, probably the most useful approach is for the team to create and refine a set of basic, general image/impression ground rules. Leaders should then extend the support and trust to the troops to go out in the brave new world, to creatively apply those guidelines in between and on the lines (SOPs), and to have a nice day. (The author strongly suspects this approach lands somewhere close to the current popular notion of "empowerment.")



This approach seems to make a lot more sense than constructing 150 rules for where/how we can/can't, go/not go, do/not do and then spending the next 20 years frustrating everyone in the department trying to make sense out of understanding/applying/enforcing them.

The objective of this approach is to simply and naturally ask, "How does what I am doing look to Mrs. Smith?" by the firefighter who is in control of that activity right where and when it occurs. Mrs. Smith is a regular, normal person who looks at things in the community in a reasonable way. She is not the self-appointed, eccentric watchdog of government workers who follows us around with binoculars and a video camera to "catch us" doing something wrong. Every system seems to have such zealots, who should be treated gently, but it doesn't make much sense to develop an appearance standard to suit them because it would require we hide out in caves. In fact, we should encourage our troops to become a part of their neighborhood/community and to meet and get to know the customers before they need us in an emergency. This contact creates the opportunity to introduce ourselves, talk

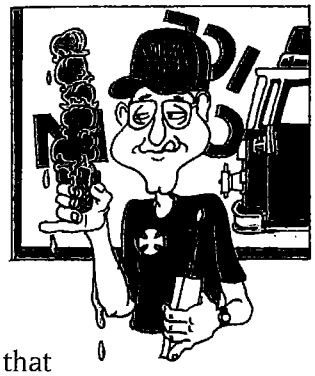
Consider how you and what you are doing looks to others.

about our services, explain how our customers can protect themselves, answer their questions, and give them a chance to see the quality of our personnel.

Our "behavior-in-public ground rules" should be realistic, functional, good-natured, and member centered. While we should always have a subtle, built-in tape running that asks how what we are doing looks, this should be a natural, nonstressful approach that doesn't make us so concerned that we develop a nervous tic. Firefighters are smart, nice people, and if they do what comes naturally, we are pretty close to being on track — all the tape does is help us stay inside the smart zone. Firefighters are a special part of the community and should be a familiar, positive, and active sight to the customers.

Protecting the people and property of the community is our job, and it requires we understand and have a knowledge of how our customers are situated. That familiarity requires we visit, draw, train, plan, discuss, practice, and reflect on the entire community. Simply, we can't have that knowledge and hide out in the fire station.

We also live in our neighborhood while we are on duty and must do about everything any other neighbor does to get through the day. We mow the lawn, wash the windows, clean the truck, conduct fitness activities, we relax (stand by), we eat (boy, do we), watch TV, visit/gossip, talk on the phone, and sometimes we sit on the front porch and watch the cars go by.



We also leave the fire station to do a lot of nonemergency, in-service activity in our first-due area. We do pre-incident building/area pre-planning, conduct training activities, do public education, do physical fitness, shop for groceries, participate in community events, and sometimes we stop and get a big gulp or a mocha rocky road almond praline ice cream cone.

This is all normal, regular, legitimate activity that creates the exposure and opportunity to look like pros or like buffoons. A set of guideline categories designed to create a positive public impression might include the following:

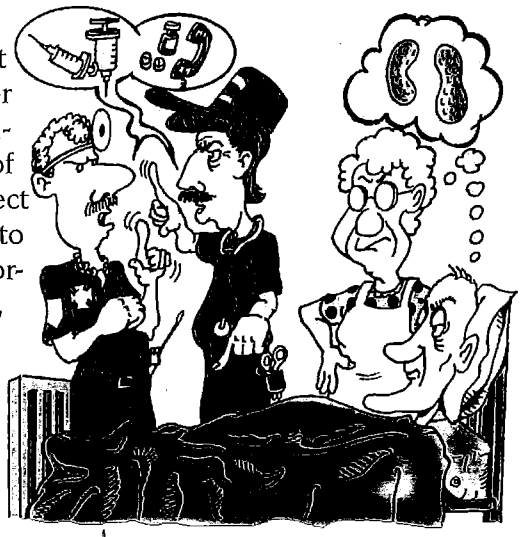
- Practice coordinated team management.
- Incident Etiquette.
- Wherever possible, follow SOPs/Mission Statement/Organizational Values.
- Avoid Unbusinesslike Impressions.
  - Right place — right time/wrong place — wrong time.
  - Hazard of excessive congregation.
  - Not joking in the wrong place.
  - Keep a clean workplace.
- Give the customer your undivided attention.
- Don't act like delivering service is an inconvenience to you.

Consider how you and what you are doing looks to others.

Practice Coordinated Team Management

Watching us play quickly shows we are a lot more like a hockey team (in so many wonderful ways) than an individual figure skater. Virtually all the service we deliver is packaged and extended in teams of action-oriented firefighters. We play a position on some team from our first fire service day to our last. Just like the hockey team, our mentality is basically tactical (centers around problem solving) and involves the composition, formation, and deployment of our team, and the moves the team(s) make to execute operationally. An ongoing organizational objective is to standardize our team execution and match that standard execution (plays) to standard conditions and situations to produce standard outcomes....all this effective standardization blabbing attempts to connect playing with winning (prevent losing).

How the team performs at Mrs. Smith's creates a major part of not only the overall outcome, but the impression of us she develops. Effective team players complete standard roles and functions that fit together with the rest of the team to get the job done. Ideally, this occurs in a natural, quiet way that reflects planning, preparation, and practice. The initial team leader (generally company officer) becomes the identifiable (to Mrs. Smith) incident commander and coordinates his/her team efforts, evaluates conditions, and calls for the adequate and appropriate resources that will be required to deal with the entire situation, including Mrs. Smith, family, pets, neighbors, spectators, etc.



A major team coordination and integration element that Mrs. Smith (and everyone else) will notice is the interpersonal conduct inside and among the team(s). How the team deals with each other becomes a major indicator of how we are connected (or disconnected). If the team members are calm, polite, and considerate of each other and discuss, listen to each other, and decide on correct action, we look like we have a smart, together act. If we are rude to each other, if we yell at each other, if we disagree about what is correct action, if we argue and beat our chests about who is in charge, we look like big dopes.

In fact, how we treat each other becomes an important part of the service delivery experience regardless of how we treat Mrs. Smith — we send a screwy (mixed) message when we are nice to her and ugly with each other. She has to wonder if us being nice to her is an act or if we are truly schizophrenic.

Another indicator of how our team plays occurs when the IC escalates the response and more of us show up. How the later-arriving team members are integrated into the existing operation becomes a major signal of how we are connected. A smooth transition that increases our overall capability becomes an important indicator of not only the management of our system but also the relationships within it.

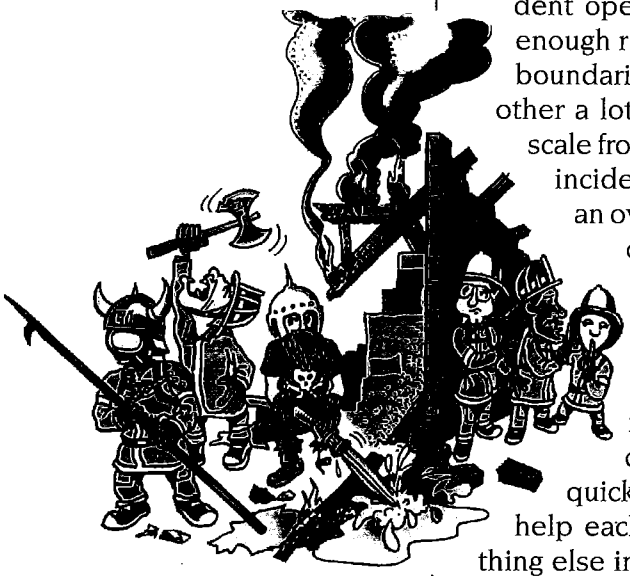
A very practical (and frequent) example of a smooth transition involves the initial and ongoing information management routine we go through with the customer. If the initial information status is passed on as more of us arrive, we appear effectively connected. If the customer must repeat the same complete status report over and over, including a

complete description of their childhood including their mother's maiden name for each successive arriving responder, we look pretty detached and disconnected. Effective team-information management is always the result of planned, practiced, and refined procedures.

Delivering fire/medical service in the street can be a high energy, high stress, action-oriented process that occurs very quickly and many times in an emotionally charged setting. If we don't practice and play according to the team plan, it's pretty easy to get grumpy with each other. It's tough for Mrs. Smith to have much confidence in us controlling her problem — or a very positive memory of us at all — if we can't control ourselves.

Incident Etiquette

Incident operational service delivery is the most basic and essential reason we exist. The operations that deliver service to Mrs. Smith define us personally and create our department identity (if they don't, what does?). A major element in the incident operational process is how we treat each other during these rough and ready times. Simply, how Engine 3 deals with Engine 4 while they play together at show time creates a compelling and durable impression and reaction inside and outside our system (i.e. family) about how we regard each other. Incident operations are typically fast and dirty and there is generally enough running room within our SOPs to allow us to be inside of the boundaries of the technical and tactical guidelines and still treat each other a lot of different ways. Those ways range along the treatment scale from positive (nice) to negative (not so nice). The department's incident relationship standards among team members can create an overall (positive) expectation and should be explicitly stated, carefully evaluated, and critically managed by bosses on every level. Patrolling the perimeter around this interpersonal treatment (etiquette) becomes a major role for such bosses during incident operations. If the kids use the fast moving, many times unstructured, times that occur during fire fighting and other incident operations to be mean, ugly, or grumpy with each other, their parents (bosses) must quickly correct such behavior. Conversely, kids that play nice and help each other should be hugged and kissed. Like about everything else in our system, bosses must become and always be the role model examples of how being nice looks during tough times.



We continually plan, train, practice, discuss, simulate, and fantasize about show time, so being effective during these emergency operations is very important to us. Our incident operational capability is a major element in how we feel about our jobs, each other, and (most important) about ourselves. How our teammates treat us (as internal customers who are on the receiving end of the treatment process) when the most important part of our job is occurring, sends a high impact message that sticks with you. Being treated in a positive helpful way by your teammates when the chips are down creates a reinforcing connection among the team. This positive treatment causes the idea that we are truly internal customers to come to life and become very believable. When the opposite occurs and we use response events as a free-for-all

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